



Free at Last: The Sudbury Valley School

Daniel Greenberg , Carol Palmer (Photographer) , Michael M. Greenburg (Photographer) , Andrew Brilliant (Photographer)

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The best-selling description of the school is bursting with the excitement of life at Sudbury Valley. Free at Last is also chock-full of stories that illustrate the many unique features of this highly original model.

“Age mixing is Sudbury Valley’s secret weapon. I never could make heads or tails of age segregation. People don’t live their lives in the real world separated by age, year by year. Kids don’t all have the same interests or abilities at a particular age.

“Anyway, we soon found out how children mix when they are left to their own devices. They mix. Just like real people. The principle is always the same: if anyone wants to do something, they do it. Interest is what counts. If the activity is on an advanced level, skill counts. A lot of little kids are much more skillful than older ones at a lot of things.

“When the skills and rate of learning aren’t all on the same level, that’s when the fun begins. The kids help each other. They have to, otherwise the group as a whole will fall behind. They want to, because they are not competing for grades or gold stars. They like to, because it’s terribly satisfying to help someone else and succeed at it. And it’s terribly pleasing to watch. Everywhere you turn at school, age mixing confronts you.”

Free at Last: The Sudbury Valley School Details

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From Reader Review Free at Last: The Sudbury Valley School for online ebook

Mandar says

Story of the inner workings of an amazing, un-orthodox school, started by parents concerned about a broken education system. Gives a lot to think about!

I am reminded of Taleb's aphorisms on the Bed of Procrustes: Instead of fitting schools to the needs of children, we (in the modern schools) are trying to make our children fit to a pre-defined 'system' of learning and evaluation. It was never gonna work.

Robert says

Fantastic! This book exploded my whole notion of teaching. Imagine a school where the students purposefully take charge of their own learning, the care and upkeep of the school facilities and equipment, vote on how the school should function right along with the teachers in pure townhall-democratic fashion, mix with other students of all ages in the learning process, and help each other.

The teachers are strictly facilitators for the student's own desire to learn; therefore, the teacher doesn't have to gin up student interest in a subject, ever. I can't even comprehend what such a school would be like to teach in since I have always had to try and compel my students to be interested in the subject matter and force them to follow my own or the schools plan of learning. The Sudbury Valley School is a school I would love to see in action.

Ashley says

I would give this book 4 and a half stars if I could. It was very interesting. I talked about it to my partner and it sparked quite a debate between us. I love when we can engage in conversations like that! It was a unique read, and I actually was able to meet two young students who attend a modern democratic school and I was so intrigued by their experience.

I highly recommend reading this book if you're interested in education!

Jedda says

I read this book when I was in junior high and am excited to see how my perspective has changed now that I'm the mom with kids in school, rather than the student myself. It's not saying too much to say that it has changed my life. Life and learning cannot be separated.

Jill says

Books that challenge current beliefs of "how humans learn" are a bit of a hobby of mine. This is probably due to the fact that while I did very well in public school in every measure there is, it irritated me to be there the entire time I was enrolled and I couldn't wait to get out. I was very good at the system but never felt the system was helpful to me.

This book is about a very different kind of school. A quote from the introduction, "Some learn best from teachers or other students, others learn best by themselves." Yes. "As far as learning and teaching were concerned, we wanted people to be able to learn only what they were eager to learn -- what they set out to learn on their own initiative, what they insisted on learning, and what they were ready to work hard at."

A quick look at the table of contents reveals this is no ordinary book about theories or pedagogy. This is a book about a school which began during the political turmoil of the late 1960s and has maintained its purpose since. Age mixing, play, special expenditures, school corporations, persistence, learning, evaluation, "Good Kids" and "Troublemakers" (one of my favorite chapters), and The Proof of the Pudding.

A final favorite quote from the afterword, "Everything about the school conveys our belief that any human interest is a worthwhile pursuit if only it has been chosen freely and followed from true inner desire. Our distinctions are between superficial interests and deep ones, not between "worthy" ones and "unworthy" ones...and this attitude follows our students through life, keeping them comfortable with others, regardless of what path they have chosen."

An interesting and perspective altering view on the purpose and path of education, childhood, and lifelong pursuits.

Peppermint Patty says

The bad grammar used in this book makes me doubt the effectiveness of their educational method.

Eli says

Sounds like an amazing way to spend a childhood - educational in a more human way.

Emma Swales says

This book is merely an insight into how the Sudbury school runs. It is insightful and interesting to anyone interested in Democratic Schools and Self Directed Learning.

Alex says

"In [Sudbury Valley School], you're supposed to do what you like; in the others, you're supposed to like what you do" (Greenberg 101).

This collection of anecdotes and reflections by founding member Daniel Greenberg shows another way to school children. The point isn't about attaining some great philosophy, key to happiness, or learning some set of skills, key to participation in society; the point is to find for yourself, what you will.

Caitlin says

democratic principles put into democratic practice, with full respect for children and adults alike. This book is a dream to read, emphasizing the best of the experience and alluding to some of the difficulties--which I can only imagine were heated and heartbreaking, as principled arguments about living often are. The Sudbury school share elements of pedagogical philosophy with Waldorf Schools and Montessori schools, but puts them in contemporary American terms, and leaves behind many of the vexing beliefs and practices that haunt the other two methods. I'd love to read more books on the Sudbury Valley school, by its students especially. And I'd love to read more details about those who were voted off the staff.

Also of interest: has this method been used by any schools that are not majority white/middle class? how does this work for students whose first language is not English? I think it might, but might be harder for both students and staff to adjust to.

Tori Stuckey says

Fascinating. Read it in one day (partly by necessity as I have to return it to the library in two days and I can't renew it). Free children are such a foreign concept to the world. So few of us experienced it in our own childhoods and so many are living out their childhood power struggles with their own children. I believe in free children. The practical implementation and shedding of my own misconceptions is taking time and error, but I'm working on it. Books like these help me to see that I'm on the right path. What a different world it would be if children weren't compelled to do what we think they must.

Kathryn says

I think I would have blossomed in this school. No PE unless I wanted it would have taken so much stress off of me. I like this concept of schooling and definitely would have looked into it for our daughter if it had been available. I'd like to read a newer book on how the schools are doing, this book was written in 1987.

Sarah Estes says

Compelling. I think I would trust it more if it was written by someone who wasn't so invested in the success of the school. Still, it was an interesting read.

Annika says

Absolutely Loved this book! Encouraging and inspiring!!! I would love to start something like this in Canada

Sophia Ciocca says

This book fully convinced me that progressive education is the best kind, successfully teaching all of the things I believe education should teach -- creativity, self-discovery, critical thinking, growth mindset, and the ability and confidence that one can learn anything he/she needs to when the need arises. The book was written rather simplistically, which was charming, though I wonder how much Daniel Greenberg left out, as it often struck me as a bit too perfectly functional.
