

Former Students' Evaluations of Experiences at a Democratic School: Roles of the Democratic Processes, Staff, and the Community of Students

Peter Gray, Gina Riley, and Kevin Curry-Knight
Boston College, USA; Hunter College, USA; and East Carolina University, USA

Abstract *Reported here is a survey of former students of a radically alternative school, the Hudson Valley Sudbury School (HVSS). Like other Sudbury model schools, HVSS is a democratically administered primary and secondary day school, governed by the students and staff together, that has no academic requirements but supports students' self-directed activities. The aim was to learn about the respondents' experiences with and evaluation of those features of the school that define the Sudbury model—the democratic legislative and judicial procedures, the non-intervention policy of the staff, and the freedom of students to associate with other students, regardless of age, throughout the school day. The majority of respondents were happy with all of these aspects of the school, though there were some dissenting views. A major finding was that nearly all the respondents felt that they had learned most from their freely chosen interactions with other students.*

Keywords democratic school, Sudbury model school, Self-Directed Education, follow-up of graduates, democratic school governance

Introduction

The term “democratic school” has various accepted meanings. As the term is used here, it refers to a school where the students have much or full control over their own activities and learning and have a clear voice in school governance. The most long-standing such school today is Summerhill, a boarding school in the UK founded in the early 1920s by A. S. Neill. Arguably the most long-standing democratic school in the United States is the Sudbury Valley School, in Massachusetts, founded in 1968 by Daniel Greenberg and a group of other education visionaries (Gray, 2017). The study we report here is a survey of former

students of the Hudson Valley Sudbury School (HVSS), in Kingston, New York, USA, which opened its doors in 2004 (after a shaky earlier start and then closing), approximately 16 years prior to our survey. HVSS is one of around three dozen schools in the United States that are modeled after Sudbury Valley. Such schools are commonly referred to as “Sudbury schools” or “Sudbury model schools,” but that does not imply any formal connections among them or to the original Sudbury Valley School.

As Traxler (2015) has pointed out, the Sudbury model is rarely discussed and too-little known by educational theorists and researchers, perhaps largely because the model is so far removed from dominant approaches to education that it is hard to integrate into ongoing educational dialogues. Here (for the next eight paragraphs) is a primer, which provides a foundation for understanding the research to follow (for a brief discussion of the theoretical foundations and history of Sudbury schools, see Valeeva & Kasimova, 2015).

Although some variations in philosophy and practice occur from school to school, all schools that we refer to here as Sudbury schools (whether or not the schools explicitly refer to themselves with that label) share certain characteristics. They are day schools. They typically admit students over the entire school-age range, from as young as four years old, on through the late teenage years. Students are not assigned to grades or specific spaces but can move freely throughout the indoor and outdoor school areas and are never segregated by age. One major premise of the Sudbury philosophy is that students learn a great deal from one another, especially when students can interact freely with those who are older or younger than themselves (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Greenberg, 1992).

Sudbury schools (as well as various other democratic schools and learning centers, such as Agile Learning Centers) are places for what today is increasingly called Self-Directed Education (SDE). Within this rubric, *education* is defined as everything a person learns that helps that person to live a satisfying and meaningful life; *self-directed education* is education that derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner; and *Self-Directed Education* (with capital letters) refers to the deliberate practice in which young people are fully free to educate themselves in their own chosen ways rather than by means of a forced curriculum (Alliance for Self-Directed Education, 2021; Gray, 2017). The SDE philosophy, which pervades Sudbury schools, emphasizes both rights and responsibilities. Students have the right to choose their own paths, but, at the same time, have the responsibility to govern themselves in ways that lead to their desired goals and meet the requirements of social living.

As centers for SDE, Sudbury schools provide tools, space, time, and access to helpful adults and other students to enable education but impose no requirements for learning or tests of learning. Students are free, essentially all day, every school day, to pursue their own interests, in their own chosen ways, as long as they do not

violate any of the school's democratically made rules. An exception to the principle of non-evaluation is that students at most Sudbury Schools, including HVSS, have the option of creating and defending a graduation thesis, which, if accepted, allows them to receive a diploma from the school. The thesis procedure at HVSS has gone through several iterations. In the most recent years before the survey, it involved preparation and successful defense of the thesis, "I am prepared to graduate," to a committee consisting of an alum of the school and staff members from other Sudbury model schools.

The governing body of a Sudbury school is the School Meeting, run in a formal manner (commonly by Roberts' Rules of Order), which meets once a week and makes all school rules. At the Meeting each student and staff member in attendance, regardless of age, has one vote. None of the rules have to do with education. They are the sorts of rules required to enable a diverse group of people to share a space harmoniously. There are rules against destroying property, interfering with one another's activities, harassment, littering, failing to put items away after using them, and the like.

If anyone (student or staff) violates a rule, any school member (student or staff) can "bring that person up" to the Judicial Committee (JC). The JC is made up, at any given time, of an age-mixed set of five or six students and one staff member. As in the larger adult community of the United States, jury duty (serving on JC) is required when one's name is called. The JC examines the evidence and, if it decides that a rule was violated, chooses an appropriate consequence. For example, a student who failed to put art equipment away after using it might be barred from the art room for a day. At a more extreme level, a student who violated a state law (such as by using an illicit drug on campus) might be suspended until such time as he or she is ready to come back and present, convincingly, a sincere desire and ability to take the school rules seriously.

The staff members of a Sudbury school are not referred to as teachers. Part of the Sudbury philosophy is that everyone is both a teacher and learner, so it is senseless to have a separate class of person called "teacher." One of the more controversial characteristics of most Sudbury schools, including HVSS, is that staff members generally refrain from initiating learning opportunities for students. The rationale is that this could reduce students' motivation to initiate their own activities. However, staff do respond to requests for help from students who ask, and this could include requests for a tutorial or, by a group of students, for a course. Although courses are sometimes organized in this way, these are relatively rare, at HVSS, as well as at Sudbury schools generally.

The staff have no more official power at a Sudbury School than the students. If they have more actual power, as they often do, that may be partly because of age biases brought from the larger culture and partly because staff members have had more life experience (which students generally recognize and value), have more

knowledge of the school's policies and procedures, are generally more skilled at arguing convincingly for their viewpoints, and, as part of their job, are more deeply involved in school administration than are most students. Staff members typically occupy most of the administrative positions (such as enrollment clerk, public relations clerk, and grounds clerk), but such assignments depend on approval by vote of the School Meeting.

Admission to a Sudbury school is not based on any sort of academic record or evaluation. The primary requirement is a visiting week, which gives prospective students a chance to experience the school and the enrollment committee a chance to see if prospective students are able and willing to follow school rules without frequent reminders. Sudbury schools in the United States are private, as they do not meet the definition of a school eligible for public funding. However, because they do not require a high ratio of staff to students, and because staff members are generally willing to work for relatively low pay, the tuition is usually much lower than that for other private schools. Moreover, some of the schools, including HVSS, have generous financial aid programs designed to allow enrollment of students regardless of family income.

Beyond what it shares with all Sudbury schools, HVSS has the following characteristics. It contains a large outdoor campus, which includes a forested area, wooded natural playground, grassy playing field, and playground equipment. The indoor spaces include a fully equipped kitchen, music rooms, art room, gaming room, playroom with toys for younger children, quiet rooms, and places and equipment for photography and tinkering. The number of students enrolled has varied from a low of 35 in the school's first year up to a range of 80 to 87 during the five-year period just preceding the year of our survey. The number of staff members has also varied, ranging from 5 when the school opened to 6 to 9 in the most recent five years.

The present survey is the first ever of former students of HVSS. However, three surveys have been conducted of former students of the original Sudbury school, Sudbury Valley (Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992; Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005), and one was conducted of The Circle School (Circle School, 2105; Rietmulder, 2019). The latter school meets the criteria for classification as a Sudbury school, as defined here, though it does not refer to itself as such. Those studies revealed that the graduates were, in general, doing well in adult life. They had gone on to success in a wide range of careers, performed well in higher education if they had chosen that route, and were generally very happy that they had attended the democratic school. The present survey included students who left HVSS well before graduation age, as well as graduates, and most of those surveyed had spent less than half of what elsewhere would be called their K-12 years at HVSS. Although we asked about life experiences after leaving the school, the primary focus was on students' evaluations of their experiences at the school

when they were students there. We were especially interested in their thoughts about the roles of the democratic processes, the adult staff and the staff's non-intervention policy, and the age-mixed group of other students in their experiences and education at the school. Stated differently, this is a study of former students' perspectives on those aspects of their school experience that are key components of the way that Sudbury schools operate.

General Methodology

Targeted Participants

The survey was directed toward former students of HVSS who were at least 18 years old at the time the survey was initiated (October 2019), who had been a student at the school for at least two years in their primary and or secondary school career, and for whom the school's admissions director was able to locate contact information. Fifty-five former students met these criteria, and the admissions director sent each of them an email letting them know of the study and indicating that they would receive an email from the researchers, inviting them into it. The researchers then sent a letter identifying the purpose of the study along with a link to the online consent form and survey form. The letter indicated that they were free to respond or not to the survey, were free to leave it at any time (in which case their responses would be deleted), and would be compensated for their time, with \$30, if they completed the survey. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Hunter College, of the City University of New York.

Survey Form

The survey form contained 43 questions, some of which were designed to collect demographic and other background information, including their self-identified gender, birthdate, dates of enrollment at HVSS, previous schooling before enrolling at HVSS, level of parents' formal education, further schooling (including higher education) after leaving HVSS and paid employment they had held since leaving HVSS. Other questions, which are the primary focus of the study and this report, pertained to their experiences at the school and the ways that those experiences may, in their view, have influenced their subsequent lives. These questions will be spelled out, along with the findings, in the results section of this article.

Qualitative Analysis

We analyzed the survey responses qualitatively using a multi-stage grounded theory approach (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012). For all questions relevant to the main foci of the study, other than those that called for strictly factual information, we (the three authors) each, independently, read and reread the responses and jotted down key terms referring to the main ideas expressed. We then each listed those key

terms, for each question, to develop categories of responses that occurred frequently enough to be of interest. At the next step, we compared the response categories that we had independently developed and, through discussion, developed an agreed-upon list of response categories, to use for coding, and a shared understanding of how to define each. Then we each read each questionnaire again and coded the responses using the coding categories that we had agreed upon. At this stage our coding sometimes involved combining information from more than one questionnaire item, as explained in the Results section. Then we compared notes on our coding of each questionnaire, to refine the codes yet further, and then, after one more round of individual coding, we met again and resolved any remaining discrepancies. We refer to the final set of response categories derived in this analysis as *themes*.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Thirty-nine of the 55 in the targeted group completed the survey form (a response rate of 71%). Of these, nineteen identified themselves as male, fifteen as female, and five as “other” (chose not to identify as either male or female). The respondents ranged in age from 19 to 33, with a median age of 24, at the time that they filled out the survey. Three were 19, thirty-two were in their 20s, and four were in their early 30s. Six of the respondents self-identified as a racial minority, five as a minority in gender identity, and four others as a minority in sexual orientation. Thirty-one indicated that at least one of their parents had a bachelor’s degree or above, seven others indicated that at least one parent had a high school diploma, and one did not provide clear information on this question.

Twenty-five (64%) of the respondents were, by our criteria, graduates of HVSS, meaning that they left in their late teenage years and did not go on to secondary schooling elsewhere. None were enrolled at HVSS for all of their primary and secondary school years. The range of total years enrolled was from 2 to 11, with a median of 3 and mean of 3.8. Eight respondents were enrolled for 6 years or more. Twenty respondents first enrolled at age 13 or older and another seven left the school before age 13. The remaining respondents first enrolled sometime before age 13 and left sometime after that age. All of the respondents had at least some schooling or homeschooling prior to enrollment at HVSS. Sixteen had attended public school only, two had attended private school only, five had been homeschooled only, and the remaining sixteen had attended some combination of two or all three of these schooling varieties.

At least twenty-six of the respondents had gone on to some form of higher education (two omitted this information). Of these, five had completed a bachelor’s degree, four had completed an associate degree, and at least eight others were currently enrolled in a degree program. Nearly all of the respondents indicated that they were gainfully employed, and twenty-five said they were fully economically

independent (thirteen, most of whom were students in higher education, said *no* to this question and for one the response was not clear).

Survey Results

Student's Evaluations of the School's Formal Democratic Processes

One item on the survey asked: "*What are your thoughts about the value of the School Meeting and the Judicial Committee at HVSS? Were they fair? In what ways did they contribute to, and/or detract from, the efficient running of the school and/or your own experiences while there?*" In what follows, both here and in subsequent results subsections, the terms in italics are descriptor terms for the themes that we identified and coded. In all sections, we include only those themes that were expressed by at least five respondents.

Most of the respondents wrote about positive benefits of the democratic processes. The themes that emerged most frequently were that the School Meeting and Judicial Committee (JC) generally operated in ways that were *fair* (just), imparted a sense of *empowerment* to the students, created a sense of *equality* among school members, and were an *effective way to run the school*. These four themes were expressed, respectively, by twenty-six, fourteen, thirteen, and thirteen respondents. In addition, eight respondents indicated that participation in these processes helped them *learn about democracy* and six indicated that being involved in the JC (as juror or defendant) helped to *make them a better person*. Here is a sample of quotations, each from a different respondent, illustrating these themes:

- "I felt they were fair. I may not have always agreed with every decision they made, but in school meeting everyone gets an equal vote. In JC, again, whether I agreed with the outcome or not, I still believed that pretty much everyone involved was dedicated to making a fair and just decision and upholding the laws and beliefs of the school and its students. Being on JC wasn't always fun, in fact it mostly wasn't. But I appreciated the fact that the school respected and trusted its students enough to give us that freedom and responsibility. Debating fellow students and even staff members in JC and school meeting and sometimes swaying them with my arguments showed me that my opinions and views can be valuable, something I never felt at my other school." [Coded as *fair*, *empowerment*, *equality*, and *learn about democracy*.]
- "While taking part in the School Meeting and Judicial Committee was definitely not my favorite part of the day, I feel that it was excellent preparation for living in a democratic society. It really taught me that for things to be fair, everyone's voice mattered and needed to be heard, even

if I didn't like them or they were annoying." [Coded as *fair* and *learn about democracy*.]

- "The Judicial System is what makes [HVSS] so special and thrive. Yes, I think everything was fair, and if it wasn't I could make a motion to change it. The system made everything run smoothly." [Coded as *fair*, *empowerment*, and *effective way to run the school*.]
- "I believe that School Meeting, JC, and the trial system instilled the feeling that my thoughts were equal to those of adults when it came to decision making." [Coded as *equality* and *empowerment*.]
- "I liked that it gave me responsibility and made me feel accountable not just for myself but for others as well. At times it was definitely used for situations that didn't warrant it and other times for situations that could have used a higher form of enforcement, but for the most part I found that it made me feel mature and so I learned to be mature." [Coded as *made me a better person*.]
- "For me personally, being called out on my actions by a group of my peers did a lot more to shape my moral compass than ridicule from an adult ever would." [Coded as *made me a better person*.]

On the negative side, six participants indicated that the judicial process was too often *unfair*, such that some students were treated less justly than others; and five noted that *staff members tended to dominate* the meetings, wielding more influence than the students. Here are quotations illustrating these themes:

- "Both can be fair and work well in theory, but that depends entirely on the people running it. In HVSS, it often detracted in the simple case of having too much nepotism. Other than that, it can be effective if used properly and with transparency." [Coded as *unfair*.]
- "I believe the School Meeting and the Judicial Committee were very important parts of HVSS and relatively fair. The School Meeting however did tend to be dominated by staff rather than students. This resulted in most of its decisions reflecting that of the staff rather than the school as a whole." [Coded as *staff members tended to dominate*.]

Student's Evaluations of the Roles of the School's Staff

One item in the survey asked: "*What roles, if any, did staff members at HVSS play in your experiences/education at the school? In what ways did they contribute to and/or detract from these?*"

The most common categories of response to this were that staff members served as *facilitators* to the students' education, were in some cases *teachers* or *mentors*, were valued because they *treated students with respect, as equals*, and

were *effective administrators* of the school. (We note that the distinctions among *facilitator*, *teacher*, and *mentor* were somewhat arbitrary and often debatable in our coding. Generally, we considered facilitation to be help in an activity directed primarily by one or more students, teaching to be the provision of a requested course or tutorial, and mentoring to be the provision of relatively long-term guidance. In the end, we combined teaching and mentoring into one category.) These four themes were expressed, respectively, by twenty-four, eleven, eleven, and ten participants. Here is a sample of quotations illustrating these themes:

- “The staff were always ready to help students and listen to their issues; they would aid students in organizing groups based on their interests. While I was there, a friend and I organized a small poetry writing/reading group with one of the staff members, and we also organized a photography workshop with another staff member. All of the staff have diverse talents and hobbies and are ready to help students pursue their own passions.” [Coded as *facilitator*.]
- “For me having responsible adults around during the day was nice. It meant that if I had a question or a problem, I had someone to go to. Having them as staff members rather than teachers was also nice because it meant that if I didn’t need them or didn’t want to interact with them, I didn’t have to.” [Coded as *facilitator*.]
- “One staff member provided one on one tutoring for me to support my desire to strengthen my math skills. This was critically important while I worked through math phobias and was challenged to learn how to be self-motivated while learning difficult concepts. One staff member spent a significant amount of time with me looking at things in microscopes, breeding animals, and exploring outside. She was a strong mentoring presence in the area of natural, unpressured curiosity of the natural world.” [Coded as *teacher/mentor*.]
- “What was great about the staff was that they treated you equally, like a person. You could have conversations with them in a very natural way and learn so much from them just by them sharing their experiences. They also would pay attention to what students liked or interests and try to find classes/programs/things that would further or fulfill a student’s interest. It was fun and engaging in a very caring but professional way.” [Coded as *treated students with respect, as equals* and *facilitator*.]
- “Staff members were always helpful for first aid assistance. And definitely necessary to keep everything organized. Kids might run the school, but they definitely couldn’t keep all the files.” [Coded as *effective administrators*.]

Not all of the comments about roles of the staff were favorable. Six respondents complained that staff were too *uninvolved* with students and five felt that some staff members were *unfair* or *biased* in their involvement with students. Here are two examples:

- “Lots of good things happened; a few were great people, but it was a weird environment. and you couldn’t get help because of their supposed fear of giving you too much guidance, but I suspect that that attitude was born from laziness, not regard for the rules.” [Coded as *uninvolved*.]
- “I learned from staff members when our interests aligned. They weren’t actually interested in a child driven school; they had a lot of self-interest at stake. [coded as *unfair/biased*.]

Student’s Evaluations of the Roles of Other Students and Free Age Mixing

One item on the survey asked: “*What roles, if any, did other students at HVSS play in your experiences/education at the school? In what ways did they contribute to and/or detract from these?*” And another item, immediately after that, asked: “*At HVSS students over a wide age range are free to interact with one another. In what ways, if any, did such free age mixing contribute to and/or detract from your experiences/education?*” Because many respondents commented on age-mixing in response to the first of these two items, in our coding we combined these two items as if they were one.

Thirty-six of the thirty-nine respondents stated clearly that they valued the *community of students*, and thirty-one stated that they valued the *age diversity*. Many said directly that their interactions with other students provided the primary foundation of their education at the school. Our qualitative analysis revealed that they valued most greatly the *friendships* made, learning to *relate to people of all ages*, and the *social skills* acquired from so much time interacting with other students. These themes were expressed, respectively, by thirty-one, twenty-two, and twenty-two respondents. In addition, eleven reported that they valued the *collaborative learning* with other students as they worked together on specific projects, eight that they valued *learning from older students*, seven that they valued *caring for (or helping) younger children*, and five that they acquired a *broad worldview* by interacting with such a diverse group. Here are some quotations illustrating these themes:

- “I made many friends while at HVSS, and many of the friends from HVSS that I still keep in touch with are people that I would never have even considered as possible friends before attending HVSS. HVSS really opened my mind to the possibility of life outside a strict religious

community and definitely influenced my worldview as an adult.” [Coded as *friendships* and *broad worldview*.]

- “The other students were all great. They made my experience a much more positive one. I wasn’t bullied, and I learned crucial social skills that I hadn’t learned during public school. As an autistic person, looking back on it, the Sudbury environment was ideal for learning these.” [Coded as *social skills*.]
- “I learned so much from my fellow students. Just spending time with people, working together to figure something out, whether that be learning to play a game like Magic the Gathering or Yu-gi-oh or creating new games like Ham’bush. The collaborative learning environment meant so much to me and was fantastic. ...Having peers to learn from and to teach is fantastic. Sharing an interest with someone and learning about it together is one of the most effective ways that I learn.” [Coded as *collaborative learning*.]
- “I spent time reading to the younger children. I had nice relationships with younger students that I wouldn’t have had in a traditional setting. Some of my close friends were elementary school aged. This offered a really nice mix of experiences throughout the day. I learned a lot about how to relate to people of all ages. I spent a lot of time observing behavior and how people related. I also enjoyed having an entire day to socialize with other students my age. It was really, really nice to just be able to exist with other people. That was probably my major learning point and area of growth/focus during my time there—relationship building and developing socialization skills.” [Coded as *caring for/helping younger children*, *relate to people of all ages*, and *social skills*.]
- “I think the major role that other students played was similar to the staff in some ways. I think the biggest benefit is having peers to act as role models and to give younger students access to socialization with older students. I think the other big benefit to having age mixing between students is exposure to hobbies and ideas that otherwise may not have been part of a student’s life, especially if the activity is something that might require a higher level of complexity to understand but can still be understood well enough by a younger student to participate. I think students are also more likely to respect and be willing to accept criticism from people that they view as peers rather than adults who are viewed as authority figures.” [Coded as *learning from older students* and *collaborative learning*.]

On the negative side, only two themes emerged that were expressed by more than four participants. Eight participants reported that there were *not enough students my*

age when they were there, and six reported that they were sometimes *annoyed by younger children*. Here are quotes illustrating these:

- “My age group was pretty limited, when I was enrolled, but I had a lot of interaction with the younger students! A lot of the time, that was great. They would come around and chat with me as they ran through their daily motions, which made me feel way less isolated than the limitation of my age group could sometimes make me feel. Other times, it was frustrating to have a bunch of little heads looking over my shoulder. Although, I will credit those little heads with teaching me how to tell people that I need space.” [Coded as *not enough students my age* and *annoyed by younger children*.]
- “I had many friends at Sudbury, but there were very few other girls my age, especially at the end of my time there. Interacting with all age groups was definitely a positive experience, but I think the lack of other girls my own age was definitely one of my reasons for leaving in the end.” [Coded as *not enough students my age*.]

Student’s Overall Evaluations and the Perceived Effects of Having Been a Student at HVSS

An item near the end of the questionnaire asked participants to check *Yes, very glad*; *Yes, moderately glad*; *No, it would have been better for me not to attend HVSS*; or *Other (please specify)* in response to the question “*All-in-all, are you glad that you attended HVSS during the years that you did, rather than a more traditional school?*”

Twenty-three checked *very glad*, ten checked *moderately glad*, two checked *no*, and four checked *other*. In other words, thirty-three of the thirty-nine respondents (85%) clearly expressed that they were happy or very happy they had attended the school and only two clearly expressed that they were not. Both of those who checked *no* were enrolled for just two years and noted elsewhere on the questionnaire that they regretted the lack of academic training at the school. Of the four who checked *other*, two indicated mixed feelings about having been a student there; another indicated that the two years he had been enrolled was not enough time to experience the benefits of the school; and the fourth said she was enrolled (from age 16 to 18) only because her parents would not allow her to go directly to college at age 16, so she was biding her time at HVSS.

Immediately following the item asking participants about their being glad or not about having attended HVSS was an item that asked: “*Please elaborate on your answer to the previous question by describing what you consider to be (a) the biggest advantages and (b) the biggest disadvantages to you derived from attending.*” Many responded to this item in part by referring to their responses to

previous items on the questionnaire. Therefore, in coding responses here we took into account anything they said, anywhere on the survey, having to do with long-term advantages or disadvantages, to them, of having attended HVSS.

On the positive side, the following eight themes were most frequent: Twenty-two participants expressed the view that their experiences at HVSS made them better able to *connect with others*, seventeen indicated that the school augmented their capacity for *self-direction or independence*, sixteen indicated that their experiences heightened their *self-knowledge* (their understanding of themselves), fourteen referred to *specific skills* (beyond social skills) that they acquired or honed while at HVSS, twelve indicated that they learned to be *assertive* in advocating for their own needs, ten indicated that they acquired a *broader worldview* than they otherwise would have, eight cited an increase in *self-motivation*, and seven referred to *moral lessons* that they acquired at HVSS. Here is a set of quotations illustrating these themes:

- “I learned how to interact with all sorts of people, alike to me and not alike, and I think that trumps everything else. Being able to communicate is very important.” [Coded as *connect with others*.]
- “I think the Sudbury experience gave me a few of the tools I needed to follow my own path and stand up for what I believe.” [Coded as *self-direction/independence* and *assertive*.]
- “The biggest pros are gaining independence and building a sense of self and knowing your interests.” [Coded as *self-direction/independence* and *self-knowledge*.]
- “I learned social skills, improved art and writing skills, and learned leadership skills.” [Coded as *connect with others*, *specific skills*, and *assertive*.]
- “Biggest advantage: How to act in a respectful manner, how to act responsibly in the larger world.” [Coded as *moral lessons*.]

Here are two who elaborated more extensively:

- “I feel that my time at HVSS had lasting benefits that I’ve noticed over the course of the years following my time there, such as community living ability, group problem solving, leadership skill development, communication skill development, self-motivation, wonder, curiosity, self-exploration, lasting friendships, ability to persevere when challenged, ability to be comfortable with uncertainty and boredom, comfort with shifting interests, focus, life path, ability to teach, ability to ask for help and leverage other resources when a desire to learn is present, having desire (nearly insatiable) to learn new things and explore ideas, comfort

and freedom to be myself.” [Coded as *connect with others, assertiveness, self-knowledge, self-direction/independence, and self-motivation.*]

- “I think the biggest advantage, in all honesty, is being alive. Public school was making me very suicidal. I was allowed to be myself. I appreciated all the freedom so much and I really do believe in needing some of that. People who are in school their entire life and then get out sometimes feel so lost, so I think I have more direction and sense of control than someone like that even though I’m not sure what I want to be doing right this second.” [Coded as *self-direction/independence and self-knowledge.*]

Only two themes emerged on the negative side. Twelve respondents noted that at some point they had experienced an *academic learning gap* and eight noted effects of the *lack of structure* at HVSS. These two themes often overlapped, as a deficit in academic learning was the most-often-cited consequence of lack of structure. Here are examples illustrating these themes:

- “One of the cons is that you might neglect subjects outside of your interests. Although I tried to pressure myself into studying math, even though I was far from interested in it, it was difficult. And I don’t know if other students would take care to do the same.” [Coded as *academic learning gap and lack of structure.*]
- “I think the biggest disadvantage is that I feel like I am missing some historical context and baseline knowledge of social, political, and philosophical issues.” [Coded as *academic learning gap.*]
- “Biggest disadvantage: Maybe, on the other hand, the freedom was bad. Maybe I got to do so much nothing and so much of what I wanted that it’s hard to do anything I don’t want to do now and sometimes life is really about just doing stuff you don’t want.” [Coded as *lack of structure.*]

Discussion

This is the first survey of former students at a Sudbury model school to focus primarily on the respondents’ experiences with and evaluation of the unique features of such schools. These features are the democratic mode of administration, the nonintervention policy of the staff, and the students’ continuous ability to interact with one another freely, regardless of age. Following the order used in presenting the results, we will here discuss these one by one and compare our findings to what long-time staff members at Sudbury schools have written.

Evaluation of the Democratic Processes

The great majority of the respondents had positive things to say about the operation of the School Meeting and the Judicial Committee. Most stated that these bodies

usually operated in a way that was fair. Many said that having a voice on these bodies gave them a sense of empowerment (their opinions mattered) and contributed to a sense of equality, which contrasted with their experiences of hierarchy in their previous schooling. Some also claimed that their experiences with School Meeting and JC taught them useful lessons about how democracy works, and some said that the system of trial by a jury of their peers, when they were accused of a misdeed, had a more powerful effect on improving their behavior than would happen in a typical school, where discipline would be handled in a top-down, authoritarian manner. Several, however, stated that in their view the decisions made were not always fair and that some students were treated more favorably than others. In this regard, it is worth noting that, at about the time when our survey was initiated, the school, through its democratic procedures, began an experiment with a new way of responding to rule violations, from one of handing out “sentences” to a procedure that involves negotiating an agreement aimed at restoring whatever harm was caused by the rule violation.

Some respondents noted that the democratic processes did not result in students' having influence equal to that of staff members. Observers of Sudbury School Meetings have often commented on the relatively high degree of staff influence at the Meetings. In an ethnographic study of a very small Sudbury school, Wilson (2015) observed that staff members were more likely to attend school meetings, were more likely to speak up at the meetings, and were more likely to prevail in their argument than were most students. In her report she described this as a failing of democracy because the School Meetings failed “to create a truly egalitarian space where each person has equal voice in the decisions being made.” To some degree, this criticism reflects the contested nature of what democracy means and requires (Gallie, 1955). Some democratic schools use processes (such as sociocracy) that place primary value on everyone's participation and ensuring that decisions gain everyone's consent (Shread & Osorio, 2019). Others, like many Sudbury schools, see democracy as a majoritarian process that allows, but does not require, all parties to participate or consent to each decision made. As Sudbury Valley founder Daniel Greenberg (1992, p. 142) has pointed out, the view that democracy means that everyone will have equal influence is a myth. He wrote, “Democracy rests on universal *suffrage*, not universal participation.”

Concerning the balance of influence at School Meetings, Jim Rietmulder (2019, p. 46), a founder and long-time staff member of the Circle School, wrote: “Staff members often prevail in policy debates during sessions of School Meeting, partly because adults more often have relevant experience, partly because adults tend to have greater skill in political persuasion, and partly because kids tend to defer to adults. Regarding this last factor, staff members are usually sensitive to such age-based deference and sometimes back off, call attention to the dynamic, or encourage speaking up.” In our experience there are differences among individual

staff members, and among Sudbury schools, in the degree to which staff back off, and we have heard persuasive arguments on both sides of the question of whether such deference is good policy or not.

Student's Evaluations of the Role of Staff

Perhaps the biggest controversy among people involved with Sudbury schools has to do with the role of staff members in students' education. The Sudbury philosophy, as presented initially by Daniel Greenberg, is that students are expected to be in charge of their education and to take initiative in requesting help from staff if they want such help. In describing the growth of this understanding in the early years of Sudbury Valley, Greenberg (1987, p. 146) wrote, "We learned how not to 'give' to students unless asked. We learned to lay back and not interfere with the internal growth of each student, whatever their ages or stages of development. That was the hardest lesson, the one that required most self-discipline, and still does for new staff members."

Staff members at Sudbury schools often struggle with the question of how to balance their administrative duties with their obligation to be available to students, and how to be available without being intrusive. Here is what Mark McCaig (2008, p. 112) has written about the role of staff at Fairhaven School, a Sudbury school that he helped to found:

"The clerkships are areas of responsibility (bookkeeping, care of the building, admissions, etc.) that we must cover to the best of our abilities. We teach classes according to student request, our level of experience and room on our schedule. We interact informally with students and colleagues when we can. Experienced colleagues advise rookies.... Clerkships are tangible, measurable aspects of our jobs. Did you pay the bills? Is that door still sticking? Have you responded to all the admissions queries? They are often huge tasks, works in progress that staff members have to learn to put down in order to be available to students. Sometimes we have to schedule 'hanging out' because other commitments suck up our time. Some days we drift throughout the campus, checking in with people; on other days we may plant ourselves in a central location so folks can find us. Always, though, we tread lightly, careful to balance availability with respectful distance."

Our survey indicates that the staff at HVSS achieved the balance between availability and non-intrusiveness in a way that satisfied the great majority of the respondents. Far more positive comments were made about the role of the staff than negative ones. Most saw the staff as facilitators of their education, meaning that they provided help when asked, and some described them also as teachers of

specific subjects, when asked, or as long-term mentors. In addition, many students, in various ways, expressed the view that the staff treated them with respect and often as friends. Those students who were not happy with the role of staff, or not entirely so, felt that staff members did not make themselves sufficiently available to the students or that they made themselves available more to some than to others. Nobody complained that staff members had been too intrusive. Those few who expressed dissatisfaction would have liked to have more interaction with staff members, not less.

The Role of Other Students, Including Free Age mixing among Students

By far the most enthusiastically positive statements from respondents were prompted by the questions about the role of other students and the role of free age mixing in their education. All but three of the respondents stated, clearly, that they valued the community of students. They valued especially the friendships, the social skills they developed in learning to relate to such a diverse group, and the opportunities to collaborate with others on shared interests. Many were quite emphatic in saying that the community of students was the primary source of their education at the school. Here are four quotations, beyond those already presented in the Results section, illustrating that:

- “The students were everything at Sudbury. Our education there was essentially what we learned from interacting with each other.”
- “Students were my life at HVSS. I looked forward to going to school and spending time with my friends every day. ... They were all important to me and they all helped build the person I am today.”
- “The students that I befriended were the most important people to me in the world at the time. They were my new family that I chose and cared for more than anything.”
- “The other students were my family from 12 to 15 years old. They helped me create my social standards and identity.”
- “I think the other students were where I got my education from. We spent so much time socializing and learning from each other. Anything from cool sledding tricks to how to handle difficult social situations, we got directly from each other.”

If there is one major conclusion from our study, it is that former students see the community of students as the primary benefit of attending HVSS. As long-time staff members at other Sudbury schools have pointed out, Sudbury schools offer to students a community of young people who care about one another, support one another, learn from one another, and have unlimited time to interact with one another. This might be especially valuable in today's world where so much in

society pushes young people toward isolation and competition rather than community and collaboration. In his book on the operation of the Circle School, Rietmulder (2019, pp. 62-63) wrote, after introducing the theme of *agency in community*:

“Visitors easily see the *agency* part of *agency in community*. Walk in the front door and student self-determination—expression of agency—is soon apparent, and especially striking because it is so different from standard schooling. It’s easy to see students choosing to play Red Rover in the backyard, or build a city in Minecraft, or bake brownies, or play cards with friends. Less obvious is the other half of the equation: *community*. But in a world tilting towards narcissism, nihilism, and alienation, community may be the more crucial element....Immersion in community is a primal state, with roots as deep as humanity itself. Bonding first with mother, then belonging in family, tribe, and beyond, is an existential need and a fulfilling condition. Satisfying the need involves physical proximity, shared experience, and immersion in a social web. Ideally it also involves trust, emotional intimacy, and ready help....Community dampens narcissism by drawing self-focus outward, by providing social feedback, and by presenting human examples to follow....Democratic schooling tends to foster strong, supportive community, bound by trust in its institutions and shared responsibility. The effects are profound and enduring, particularly in shaping character, social proficiency, appropriate trust, friendship, self-awareness, and civic awareness.”

The statements that our survey participants made in response to the question about the biggest advantages they derived from attending HVSS fit well with Rietmulder’s discussion of agency in community. Again, the themes that emerged most frequently were improved ability to connect with others, capacity for self-direction or independence, heightened self-knowledge, ability to advocate for their own needs, a broader worldview, and moral lessons learned.

A key aspect of any Sudbury school community is that students are never segregated from one another by age. Greenberg has frequently described age mixing as the key to Sudbury Valley’s educational success. Among such writings is the following (Greenberg 1992, p. 131):

“I think it is obvious why I think that free age mixing is such a critical factor at Sudbury Valley....Free age mixing provides a free flow of interaction among people at different points along the maturation process. It enables you, as you are growing toward adulthood, always to find somebody in *both* directions. You can find somebody who is just a few

steps *ahead* in learning how to deal with the environment (just a *few* steps ahead, and therefore not so far ahead that the person is no longer encountering a lot of the same problems). Somebody who still speaks the same language, who still makes a lot of the same mistakes. But at the same time, someone who has achieved a few of the things that you want to achieve, and since you can talk about 80% of it rather easily (because you are in the same boat for 80% of it), the other 20% becomes an awful lot easier to understand. On the other hand, it is equally important to be able to turn around and find somebody a little behind you. Because you get a handle on your accomplishments and on your maturation by refining them through explaining and re-explaining and making it clear to somebody who is asking you. This is the real meaning of the commonplace saying that teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin.”

In long-term observational research at Sudbury Valley, Gray & Feldman (1997; 2004) found that students there spent much time interacting across even large age gaps and that such interactions seemed to provide educational benefits for both the younger and the older students involved. The present study indicates that former students of HVSS valued their age-mixed experiences at the school. Thirty-one out of the thirty-nine respondents made that clear in their response to the question about age mixing. They wrote about the school being a richer social community because of the diversity in age, about learning by watching and participating with older students, and about learning by helping younger ones.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Further Research

This study is of former students of just one Sudbury model school. It is not possible to say with certainty to what degree the findings here are unique to HVSS and to what degree they apply to other schools that operate using the same general procedures. Moreover, the data came from the 39 former students, out of 55 contacted, who chose to fill out and submit the quite lengthy survey form. We have no way of knowing if responses from the other 16 who were contacted would have been systematically different or not. Self-selection of respondents is a limitation of all survey research. The relatively small sample size also precluded any meaningful breakdown of the sample to see if respondents from different backgrounds, or different gender or racial identities, or different ages when they were students, or who were students at different times in the school's history, differed systematically in their reports. There would be too few respondents in any category for meaningful comparison.

It is noteworthy that none of the respondents had been at the school for all of their K-12 school years and most were there for less than half of those years. This

would be a serious problem if our primary interest had been on whether or not a Sudbury education leads to success in later life, as these students' education was largely at other schools. However, for the purpose of learning about their experiences and opinions concerning the workings of the school—about the role of the democratic processes, the non-intervention policy of staff, and the free interaction among students of all ages—the fact that they all had experiences with other schools may be an advantage. They could see and comment on the contrast between their experiences at HVSS and other schools that they had attended. The unique features of the Sudbury school may have been more salient to them because they had something to compare them to. A limitation of the students' relatively brief time at the school, however, is that they were sampling the school at only one segment in its history. Some, who expressed dissatisfaction with one or another aspect of their experience, also noted that, to their understanding, the school subsequently addressed that problem successfully. An effect of the democratic procedures at Sudbury schools is that students and staff regularly discuss and respond to complaints.

A great deal has been written by staff members of Sudbury schools about the theory behind the unique features of Sudbury model education. This is the first study that we know of that has aimed, systematically, to gain former students' opinions about those features. To a considerable degree, those opinions match well with the claims made in writings by staff members at various Sudbury model schools. The most striking finding in this study—even to the authors—is the high degree to which the respondents proclaimed that the primary value of the school was the community of other students and that their most crucial learning pertained to communication skills, self-knowledge, and community values acquired in interactions with other students. In an age of increased isolation, alienation, and competition, this aspect of a Sudbury education deserves much more research attention. How might the opportunity for meaningful community be made available to a much wider segment of our population of young people?

References

- Alliance for Self-Directed Education (2021). *What is Self-Directed Education?* Online at <https://www.self-directed.org/sde/>.
- Circle School (2015). *Circle School graduates: college attendance, academic degrees, and occupations*. Online at <https://www.circleschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Circle-School-Grads-in-2015-July-30-2015.pdf>.
- Gallie, W. B. (1955). Essentially Contested Concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 167–198. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4544562>
- Gray, P. (2017). Self-directed education—unschooling and democratic schooling. In G. Noblit (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. New York: Oxford University Press. Online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.80>
- Gray, P., & Chanoff, D. (1986). Democratic schooling: What happens to young people who have charge of their own education? *American Journal of Education*, 94, 182-213.
- Gray, P., & Feldman, J. (1997). Patterns of age mixing and gender mixing among children and adolescents at an ungraded democratic school. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 43, 67-86.
- Gray, P., & Feldman, J. (2004). Playing in the zone of proximal development: qualities of self-directed age mixing between adolescents and young children at a democratic school. *American Journal of Education*, 110, 108-145.
- Greenberg, D. (1987). *Free at last: The Sudbury Valley School*. Framingham, MA: Sudbury Valley School Press.
- Greenberg, D. (1992) *The Sudbury Valley School experience, 3rd ed.* Framingham, MA: Sudbury Valley School Press.
- Greenberg, D., Sadofsky, M., & Lempka, J. (2005). *The Pursuit of happiness: The lives of Sudbury Valley alumni*. Framingham, MA: Sudbury Valley School Press.
- McCaig, M. (2008). *Like water: The extraordinary approach to education at Fairhaven School*. Upper Marlboro, MD: Fairhaven School Press.
- Rietmulder, Jim. (2019). *When kids rule the school: The power and promise of democratic education*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Shread, C., & Osorio, M. (2019). *School circles: Every voice matters*. Wondering School. Video available at <https://schoolcirclesfilm.com>.
- Thornberg, R., & Charmaz, K. 2012. Grounded theory. In S. D. Lapan, M. T. Quartaroli & F. J. Riemer (Eds.), *Qualitative research: An introduction to methods and designs* (pp. 41-67) San Francisco: John Wiley/Jossey-Bass.
- Traxler, C. R. (2015). The most democratic school of them all: Why the Sudbury model of education should be taken seriously. *Schools: Studies in Education*, 12, 271-296.

- Valeeva, R. A., & Kasimova, R. (2015). Alternative educational system: Sudbury Valley as a model for reforming school. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 182, 274-278.
- Wilson, M. A. F. 2015. Radical democratic schooling on the ground: Pedagogical ideals and realities in a Sudbury school. *Ethnography and Education*, 10, 121-136.

Author details

Peter Gray is a research professor of psychology and neuroscience at Boston College and author of the book *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. Email grayp@bc.edu.

Gina Riley is the Program Leader and Clinical Professor of the Adolescent Special Education program at CUNY - Hunter College and is the author of *Unschooling: Exploring Learning Beyond the Classroom* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *The Homeschooling Starter Guide* (Rockridge Press, 2021). Email griley@hunter.cuny.edu

Kevin Currie Knight is Teaching Associate Professor, East Carolina University, College of Education, US. He is the author of the book *Education in the Marketplace: An Intellectual History of Pro-Market Libertarian Visions for Education in Twentieth Century America*. Email: Currieknightk14@ecu.edu



This work by Peter Gray, Gina Riley, and Kevin Curry-Knight is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).