Further thoughts concerning a Sudbury school model and the National Curriculum

There are at present many differences between the current Swedish compulsory education system, and the one outlined in my letter *Preliminary proposal to establish a Sudbury model school in Sweden.* I would like to address some of these differences, but also stress the similarities of the main purposes of each model.

The first and probably most significant area for legislative concern is the intended deviation from the National Curriculum. Chapter 4 of Skollagen states:

Utbildningen i grundskolan skall syfta till att ge eleverna de kunskaper och färdigheter och den skolning i övrigt som de behöver för att delta i samhällslivet.

This aim is based on the assumption that we as adults know what knowledge and skills pupils will need in order to take part in community life. In practice, that assumption means the content of the National Curriculum. The last 30 years or so has seen an unprecedented change in our society, mainly due to development of computer technology and the Internet. The process is accelerating, and affecting almost every aspect of the world around us. Whereas 150 years ago it may have seemed fairly evident that after school people would be needed to assist in manufacturing and production, performing highly repetitive tasks under strict authority, the majority of those tasks are now performed by computers. Straightforward predictions about the nature of our economy and work force are no longer possible. What can be said is that society as a whole is becoming increasingly divergent, markets have an increasingly broad base, and new inventions and technologies are increasingly implemented. Now more than ever, the ability to predict the nature of our society and labour force, even in the near future, is very limited indeed. Yet here the State is, deciding now what a 7 year old is going to need to know in 2018. For further elucidation of this point, see a talk given by Sir Ken Robinson, a British researcher who has spent his entire adult life researching and reviewing education across the globe, and who is now one of the most sought after Public Speakers on the international circuit. This talk was given at TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design), a four day conference bringing together the leading pioneers of our time across all disciplines, in 2006:
http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

I find it interesting how, as adults, most of us recall with a degree of condescension how little we use what we learnt in school in our daily life, yet at the same time see a country's National Curriculum almost as a matter of life and death for the State. Below is a list of subjects that I had to study up to the age of 16 in England. The total hours were compulsory, as were the first 6 subjects in the list:

Physics; Chemistry; English Language; English Literature; Maths; French; Latin; German; Drama;
French AO (a higher grade than GCSE, but taken at the end of the same year)

In my daily life, I do not use the knowledge I gained from Physics and Chemistry at all. Even though I went on to study French in Upper Secondary School, and lived in France for a period, now my knowledge of the language is very faded and I have not used it for about 15 years – even when learning Swedish, it was of no relevance. German I have all but forgotten; in respect of Maths I use only very basic arithmetic on a daily basis (which I usually get wrong anyway) and I have forgotten the rest. English and Drama are subjects I pursued in Higher Education and use in the course of my profession as an actor, teacher and director. Latin – I suppose it helped me understand some rudiments of grammar in an abstract way, but nothing more can be said of that. When I look at the National Curriculum in Sweden, I might therefore be alarmed that Geography and Biology, for example, which are not even on my list above, have a combined total of 1685 compulsory hours!

Given the discrepancy between requirements of these broadly similar Western democracies, and the experience most of us adults have that very little of our compulsory education is carried into our daily life, one must question the value of the State's basic assumption made in respect of what specific knowledge "is essential" for a child's future. It is much easier to agree on what skills might be needed for successful life in the community as an adult. Anyone who has been an employer looks for these skills in an employee: the ability to solve problems, to be able to work independently and as part of a team when necessary, to be flexible to a variety of needs and resilient to changing circumstances, to be confident and open in relations with people, to be dedicated to the task at hand, to be able to think on one's feet, and, perhaps most importantly, to be eager to learn. It is very doubtful in my mind that pursuit of the National Curriculum, in the competitive environment that school fosters, does much to develop or enhance these qualities.

To anyone who has children, it is clear that, when they are free to use their time as they see fit without interference and "guidance" from those adults in their proximity who "know best", 1) they are insatiably curious and 2) they do things at different times to each other, from birth onwards. They learn to walk at different ages and in different ways, they learn to talk at different ages, some taking longer in each phase of this process than others. They tell us when they are hungry, and often know what they need to eat. As they become older, they become interested in different things at different times, and often pursue those interests single-mindedly until their pursuit has run its natural course – or perhaps indefinitely. In other words, they spend their whole time processing the information around them to learn how to function successfully in their environment, using whatever means and tools at their disposal to do so. This is our lifelong work as human beings.

Yet when we put children in compulsory school, we expect them all to learn the same things to the same level and at the same rate as each other:

Grundskolan skall ha nio årskurser. Utbildningen i varje årskurs skall bedrivas under ett läsår. Varje läsår skall delas upp på en hösttermin och en vårtermin. Eleverna i grundskolan skall ha en i huvudsak gemensam studiegång

If they fail to do so, they receive bad grades and begin to think they are worse than others. And conversely, a pupil's success in playing the system well, in other words synthesising the information according to the tutor's wishes, does not dictate future happiness or success as an adult – particularly in our rapidly changing culture. At any rate, an atmosphere of competition is unavoidably developed in such an environment, which in turn leads to stress, anxiety and often the formation of early prejudices. Even the prejudice of age is developed – year 3 is better than year 2, year 5 are more mature than year 4. In adult life, such distinctions according to age are irrelevant. Individuality and personal experience are almost universally used as the basis for most human relationships – more transparently among adults where we have greater freedom to choose who we associate ourselves with in business or pleasure.

At a Sudbury school, there is no imposed distinction between ages. Children pursue their interests first and foremost, and often this means spending time with those older or younger than themselves. Unsurprisingly, they often choose to do this through play. It is beyond the scope of this letter to study the values and benefits of this, but if anyone is in any doubt, see particularly the essay "Play" in Daniel

Greenberg's *Worlds In Creation*, plus a whole bank of published work about the positive influence of play on consciousness from a wide variety of international sources. In a Sudbury school, children are not taught to read. By virtue of simply being alive in a community where transference of knowledge (affecting either their daily life or in reference to matters that are acutely interesting to them) is often passed on through the written word, they want to learn. They are not being forced to do so in a particular time scale or a particular way that has been agreed on by others to be best. Some watch others while they read aloud, others ask for help from children that already can or from adults, and still others seem to pick it up bit by bit, according to need. But no-one judges a child as better or worse because they learn to read at the age of 6 or the age of 10. And at Sudbury Valley School, not one student from 1968 to the present has left without being able to read (including those that enrolled at the age of 4), nor has there been one confirmed case of dyslexia (a condition arguably caused by stress induced as a result of being forced to do something at an inappropriate time, or without a genuine interest). In terms of Maths, much the same thing – if there is a genuine interest, pupils seek tuition or guidance in their learning, provided they don't just find out for themselves using resources commonly available. And if for example a child decides they want to be an engineer (because they are fascinated in the concepts and structures, not because they are told it is a steady or respectable profession), they will quickly understand that a higher level of Maths is needed. Therefore they take whatever steps they need in order to achieve it. The point throughout is that the individual is really the only one who knows where their interests lie, and how they learn in the most appropriate, beneficial way. [It is interesting to note the difference in connotations between "individual" on the one hand – a self-contained, respectable and independent entity – and "child" or "student" on the other – someone who doesn't know best, or whose choices are impoverished by comparison with those of an adult.] It may be argued that some people don't know what their interests are until years after school has finished. This is true of course, but in such cases nothing is to be gained by forcing upon them a compulsory scheme of learning arbitrarily decided topics in an arbitrary way. On the contrary, these people are much more likely to develop a sound basis of mind given freedom to do as they please, and space to find out on their own terms what leads to boredom and what to fulfillment. In the words of John Holt: "... the human animal is a learning animal; we like to learn; we are good at it; we don't need to be shown how or made to do it. What kills the processes are the people interfering with it or trying to regulate it or control it."

I could write at length about other benefits to learning of the Sudbury model. But now I want to turn my attention to the community of the school as a whole. It is the sense of community life, and the fact that each person in the community has a vote of equal weight on all decisions, that mainly distinguishes a Sudbury school from the "unschooling" movement. Skollagen states:

Verksamheten i skolan skall utformas i överensstämmelse med grundläggande demokratiska värderingar. Var och en som verkar inom skolan skall främja aktning för varje människas egenvärde och respekt för vår gemensamma miljö.

It is difficult to preach on the worth of the individual, but then tell them through their grades that they are below average. It is difficult to have democratic values when teachers decide who may speak in class and when, when students have limited choice as to what they will study, and almost no choice in how they will study it. It is difficult to state that the student is part of a democracy that is structured more like a feudal system with youngest pupils at the bottom, oldest pupils above them, followed by staff, then head teacher, then Skolverket, then the government. The idea of democracy within school is appealing, but if the students got together and voted, then came to the head teacher with the result that the majority had decided they no longer wanted to learn Maths, it would soon become apparent how real the democracy was – they would simply be told it was against "The Law", and if they didn't accept the dictate they would be punished accordingly. The sense that such student action is unthinkable to most of us shows our inherent response to the idea of democracy within national education. At best, compulsory school teaches a confused definition of democracy, one granted by degree by superior authority. When there is not even a choice as to whether or not one participates, children know very well what this means. They do not decide. And worse, they are made to feel somehow inadequate if they do not willingly participate. Yet, at the age of 16 or 17, they are all of a sudden supposed to have a mature notion of living in a community, and a sense of respect for the society that fashioned their compulsion for the preceding ten years.

A Sudbury model school is based entirely on democratic values. Children can't be told to decide, and then be swayed or overridden if their choice is not approved by a higher authority. In a Sudbury school, children know that if there is a rule that they think needs to be changed, they need to go and make their case at the school meeting. If there is a member of staff that is not popular amongst students, they make it known and argue their case at a school meeting. Through this process, they learn to be articulate, they experience the purpose and functions of rules within a community, they understand that others often have a different view, that sometimes they may need to compromise, and that the actions of an individual affect the community as a whole. The Judicial Committee (comprised almost entirely of students) in a Sudbury school is responsible for hearing complaints of breaches against the rules, hearing the defence, and deciding a suitable penalty if one is needed – and every student has to serve on the Committee. They therefore develop further their sense of community and fairness, through practice and experience – a much more profound teacher than the words "democratic values".

In summary, where the national education system strives idealistically and formulaically towards creating positive, successful members of a community, and fails through autocratic imposition of personally meaningless knowledge, a Sudbury school provides a nurturing environment where community is explored and practiced in unfettered freedom for all on equal terms from day one. Where the national education system decides on which knowledge will be useful for all individuals, and decides how they will learn it and at which pace, a Sudbury school provides the freedom for every individual to explore and discover their own interests in their own way, and thereby encourages resourcefulness, self-knowledge, independence, and genuine determination to pursue one's goals – be they short or long term. And most parents, when the anxiety and heated discussion has settled, want most of all for their children that the education they receive allows them to function as independent, happy and successful individuals, well equipped to deal with the range of experience that life tends to throw at us. A Sudbury school, like no other, cherishes our natural curiosity, determination and creativity, within a strong sense of community.

Experience with this model abroad shows that, even when it is allowed to flourish without state imposition, there is no breakdown of the social order. The Schools do not raise anarchist miscreants – quite the opposite. Anarchists and malcontents are usually bred through excessive imposition of will from an external source. Neither does society at large throw their metaphorical hands to the heavens and shout "Halleluja!", promptly abandoning the public education system and causing mass riots and unemployment. The model is significantly different to the one that most parents grew up in and accept, so these schools seem to only appeal to a small minority. My case is simple: evidence in many countries, over a relatively long period, has shown that this school model is at least as effective as any other in terms of providing children with "necessary skills and knowledge" so that they become successful members of the community. It goes about it in a very different way, and I believe parents and children should be afforded that choice. For some children, this model will make a profound and positive difference to their development, something they would not have in a traditional school. The following elements of law support my appeal to be allowed, on equal terms, to establish a Sudbury school in Sweden:

Skollagen: *Regeringen eller den myndighet som regeringen bestämmer får […] för särskilda utbildningar meddela föreskrifter om avvikelser från timplanen*

Skollagen: *Ett skolpliktigt barn skall medges att fullgöra skolplikten på annat sätt än som anges i denna lag, om det framstår som ett fullgott alternativ till den utbildning som annars står barnet till buds enligt lagens föreskrifter.*
Experience abroad shows the Sudbury model to be a satisfactory alternative – see details in my previous letter of proposal.

FNs stadgar om mänskliga rättigheter: *Rätten att välja den undervisning, som skall ges åt barnen, tillkommer i främsta rummet deras föräldrar.*

Europeiska konventionen: *Ingen må förvägras rätten till undervisning. Vid utövandet av den verksamhet staten kan påta sig i fråga om uppfostran och undervisning skall staten respektera föräldrars rätt att tillförsäkra sina barn en uppfostran och undervisning som står i överensstämmelse med föräldrarnas religiösa och filosofiska övertygelse.*

It would therefore seem that there is room enough to be entitled to establish a Sudbury-model school, and perhaps this could be done most quickly and easily through a pilot scheme. As I said previously, so long as the key principles of the model are not compromised, there is no reason why the school may not be open to assessment. Given the nature of the model, it would be impossible for this to be one of an academic standard, or those traditionally carried out by Skolinspektionen. Perhaps a Quality Management System might be the answer, and/or a Board of Trustees who may act in an advisory manner. There are also questions about how the model would fit in with Higher Education in Sweden, in terms of what Universities and students need to be aware of, and how the latter may best prepare to apply for places in the former if they wish. These are all things that need to be discussed, so that agreement can be reached whereby the process and the model are open and transparent, and not threatened by establishment or political forces. It is exciting to consider the prospect, and I hope that the legislative structures in Sweden will be adaptable and dynamic enough to allow its citizens the true democracy it aspires to, even in their choice of education. Lastly, for a more concrete example of how a Sudbury school might be structured and organised efficiently and transparently, see the articles on the following page: http://www.sudval.org/05_onepersononevote.html#01

I look forward to hearing from you and working towards a positive solution for all parties.

Jim Whiteford, 2nd April 2009.