

## A Sudbury school in Sweden - what does that entail?

The following is a list of common concerns about the model, and some answers to them. In conclusion there is a further, brief clarification as to why we think Sweden should have a Sudbury school.

### 1) If the students themselves choose their activities, will they do anything at all?

It is quite possible that to begin with, some students choose not to do very much; however, two things ought to be pointed out here. For one, that those who presume to know what goes through the students' mind ought to draw conclusions with the utmost timidity. It is very difficult to know what this "doing nothing" actually means for the student; there may be many factors that are at play, including that this is only one stage in an entire process that those of us who are currently observers have not been privy to. For another, being bored also has a function. It is the motivation that makes us consider what we really want to do, that triggers a new game or activity, or that leads to us beginning to really explore our goals. To be told what to do, which happens almost all the time in an ordinary school, does little to increase our understanding of ourselves - to the contrary, we tend to lack interest for that we are compelled to do, and often as students under the duress of another's will we drag out the assignment as long as possible by means of protest. In order to develop our understanding of that which is important to us, two ingredients are required as a basis: time and autonomy.

### 2) If the students get used to having no timetable, and no-one in authority making decisions for them, won't they find it difficult to adapt to the majority of job/work environments?

When you start a job, you do it of your own will. It is understood that certain rules apply, and that there are certain structures that one must adapt to. In other words, it is a conscious choice that you make as an adult. According to the research we have read, former students of Sudbury schools have had no difficulty in understanding this - to the contrary, because they usually develop a clear idea of what they want, and a strong sense of self reliance, they become much appreciated employees.\*

### 3) If the students are not forced to learn certain things, won't they miss out on important knowledge that they would not otherwise discover?

The basis of this view is that people should be forced to learn things because their own curiosity is not sufficient. Or that peoples' own ability to find that which is important is lacking, and therefore others must decide for them what really matters. Time and time again in Sudbury schools, it can be seen that students learn things as soon as they have a genuine (i.e. their own) reason to. People are dynamic - we develop continuously, and to learn new things is a recurring necessity in life. Often people will say, "If I hadn't been forced to do this or that, I never would have discovered such and such..." That may well have been so, but it is a weak argument for compelling people against their will. And the truth is that you never know what would have happened otherwise - it is fully possible that you discover that which is valued in some other way.

The question of what is actually important is highly subjective; and furthermore a standard curriculum contains only a small amount of knowledge, selected according to certain criteria which are debatable, and most of it is only superficially covered in class anyway. It is also true that however much one pushes and nags, if the student does not appreciate the value of the subject or knowledge that the teacher thinks is important, it is more or less a waste of time. It is evident in schools where students genuinely are the masters of their

own time, that they learn things when they themselves find the need for it - and in that case, they learn them very fast. Knowledge aside, it is possible during one's time at school to develop personal qualities that last a lifetime, and that stand one in good stead for the challenges and experiences that life offers.

#### 4) A Sudbury school may be good for some, but not everyone - doesn't everyone have an equal right to education?

It is quite true that the same type of school will not suit everyone - neither a Sudbury school nor any other. The student must choose herself. That school should be equal for everyone is a well discussed subject. We believe that, in practice, it cannot be - and has never been - of equal value to all. To take just one quote in support of this belief (though there are hundreds of similar expressions among the field of educational research): "with reference to the complexity of the aim [equal right to education] – equal access, equal opportunities, equal aims, equal teaching, equal results, equal assessment and equal outcomes, equal amount of education, the right to education according to circumstances and variations in individuals' talent and interests, as well as the differing nature of the needs of working life – one must in the end, in spite of everything, give pupils differing educations." Lindensjö & Lundgren, *Educational Reform and Political Control*, 2000, p. 88. And in summary: " 'the ideal of equal opportunities' is in practice impossible to realise." Ibid.

The State may try to make school equality statutory, but as there are so many variables, in terms of students' individual qualities and backgrounds, as well as teachers' ability and means of approach, it is not possible for schools to be the same across the country. Simply speaking, this is utopia - all people are not the same. We have different interests, different abilities, different ways of learning. Politicians often say that children have a right to education, and particularly today they misleadingly offer this as a basis for the State's right to take away freedom of choice. The European Convention on Human Rights actually states: "In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions." But in the name of equality, and in breach of the spirit of the Convention, in Sweden it is illegal to: home school your children; in practice operate a Waldorf school (or train teachers for such schools); and, establish a Sudbury school.

#### 5) If the students do not have the basic knowledge the national curriculum is supposed to ensure, won't they be disadvantaged compared to their competing peers in the job market and when applying for further education?

There is nothing to prevent a student acquiring the same basic knowledge as students in curriculum-led schools. Take one example from the US. If a Sudbury school student wants to enrol in a certain university, and knows that a minimum score on SATS tests is required for entrance, the student will do the research, practice the subject material and take the tests.\* This is a further example of how these students take responsibility for their own learning. Again and again it's the same thing that applies: once the student has decided to study further, or work in a certain field, they take the steps necessary to succeed with their choice. With genuine will, and well grounded self sufficiency, they go a long way. What the majority of us find so hard to believe or imagine is that these kids actually can, because we are so used to deciding everything for them throughout their schooling. In essence, it is about being able to trust children.

#### 6) Freedom is nice, but does it have anything to do with real life?

Many think that a Sudbury school sounds like a permanent holiday - the children just do what they like all day; and thereby do not learn anything valuable. It is understandable that one would think like this - as we have all spent many years in authoritarian schools, how one would behave in a Sudbury environment is barely conceivable. But if you consider a little how it actually may be in practice, you realise that it perhaps is not so easy as you thought at first. Is it so easy for a student, without having an adult looking over their shoulder all the time, to decide for themselves how they are going to spend their time - day in, day out? To understand how to cooperate with others, for better or worse? To know what he really wants, and how to achieve it? Is it so easy to stand firm, and present opinions about significant aspects of school life that affect the student daily? It is tough to learn how to argue your opinion, and sometimes disagree, and yet remain friends. It is tough to know what you want, instead of what you think you want, or what your friends and parents want for you. It is tough to be part of a school that most people consider strange, if not outright wrong - and in many cases to commute longer distances than your peers to be there. Yet experiencing these things is precisely what generates responsibility, consideration and self-reliance as an adult.

### 7) This sounds a bit like a war against teachers... Is it?

Though a Sudbury school may seem like the opposite of a "normal" school, and that those that are inspired by the model often have a great deal to say against compulsory education, it is important to stress that this is not intended to be anything against teachers personally. Neither the Charity nor those involved with it intend to negatively judge those that work in the school system. The truth is that there are many inspired teachers that work extremely hard, often in tough circumstances, so that students may have increased opportunities in the future.

### Why should Sweden have a Sudbury school?

One disadvantage with a welfare state is that the State, through its provision, seems to earn itself the right to a very large influence over its citizens. From this point of view the unspoken agreement between the State and the individual lies deeply rooted in Swedish culture. Or as others have expressed it:

"Embedded in the ideas of the good society lie notions of social order and how this order should be maintained and strengthened. Mapped out in all welfare work is a set of norms and techniques to ward off attitudes and behaviours which, actually or potentially, disturb this social order. [...] The rights assigned by the welfare state thereby become duty bound to allow for their being cast into the spotlight, inspected and corrected." Börjesson, Palmblad och Wahl - *In the Outskirts of the Mindful State*, 2005, pp. 29-30.

And it is at school where a great deal of this inspection and correction is established as a norm in itself. It is not only the students' academic abilities that are in the spotlight, but also their social behaviour and how they spend their free time. Much research in pedagogy revolves around the politics and psychology behind this correction and sorting. The Schools' Inspectorate in its turn inspects the schools, and thoroughly measures their performance. To expect to be granted the establishment of a Sudbury school, where there is no inspection of any kind, is almost unthinkable. This in itself ought to provoke some thought. It is of course reasonable to question the role of the State in education; and so one may ask where the boundary lies for the State's right to decide over its citizens. On whose terms is this right based? Whom does it benefit?

In an article published in *Pedagogical Research in Sweden* in 2004, Angerd Eilard wrote: "To stress consensus and similarity is a typical feature in the Swedish culture of equality." It

seems to be not only schools that should be similar, but even individuals - as far as possible. One would really rather not stand out in any way, good or bad. This way of thinking doesn't really apply in a Sudbury school. The whole point in students taking responsibility for their own education, and having the right to influence how the school is run at every level, is so that they can develop their own ways of thinking - what is important for me? Why? How do I express it? In this way a Sudbury school is a breath of fresh air in Swedish culture. It is of course understood that Jante's law [*Jantelagen* is a phrase, borrowed from a novel and often used by Swedes, that refers to the cultural phenomenon that many people feel they must be the same as others] doesn't make anyone happy.

There are pros and cons with all cultures. Among the many advantages of Swedish culture are: a long tradition of democracy; the farmers' age-old way of taking care of things themselves and finding solutions to practical problems, a tradition that has arguably contributed to Sweden's strong record and advantageous position with regards to innovation and invention; and the obvious feeling many have, that we live in a society - it isn't simply every man for himself. These are some of the reasons we think that Sweden would be a very suitable country for a Sudbury school, in spite of the fact that the model goes completely against today's political steering of the school system.

In Regeringsformen [one of the fundamental laws that forms part of the Swedish constitution] it is clear: "all public power in Sweden starts with the people." Can there be a better way to understand and appreciate this than in a Sudbury school, where the same democratic rights adults have are afforded to children? There are three important reasons for this:

- 1) children are people too. All too often in our society children are refused the right to decide in areas which matter to them;
- 2) people want to learn things that are significant to them, and have a tremendous capacity for growth and understanding - in other words, they don't need to be told by others what and how they should learn;
- 3) it is not possible to teach democracy - especially in an autocratic environment, such as a normal school is, where children lie at the bottom of the pile, under teachers, the Principal and the Schools Inspectorate, who have the power to decide just about everything in a child's daily life. Democracy must be experienced and practiced, genuinely.

We hope that reading this further clarifies why a Sudbury school is a very good preparation for adult life in a democratic society. From what has been written in books and articles on the model, and about others who have attended such a school, it can be seen that these adults have many valuable qualities to offer the society they live in and the careers they aim towards. Furthermore they have a strong feeling of self-reliance, which supports them and their families throughout their lives.

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\*Many studies have been carried out of students who attended Sudbury Valley School. They deal with how students experienced their schooling, and how things went for them afterwards - at university, at work and at home with their families. The results have been collected and quoted in a variety of books, for example *Legacy of Trust* and *The Pursuit of Happiness*. The latter can even be bought from the school's website as an eBook.