

What Happened to the Free Schools?:
The Free Schools Movement in the United States 1967-1972

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Abstract

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What happened to the Free Schools movement in the United States, and why has it been so little examined by historians of education? What legacies were left by these bold experiments in education?

The Free Schools movement was a grassroots educational movement involving hundreds of small schools throughout the United States and Canada during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The key inspirational educational figures of the movement were A.S. Neill, George Dennison, John Holt and Jonathan Kozol, all of whom promoted more freedom for students and more humane practices in education. The primary newsletter of the movement, *The New Schools Exchange*, provides a first-hand glimpse into what was happening on the ground.

This thesis shows that the free schools encountered a wide variety of practical obstacles to success which the majority could not overcome. Philosophical differences also splintered the movement and prohibited them from developing a united front to promote their educational alternatives. Only a small handful of free schools were able to become sustainable over the long haul, including two schools that are still active—Albany Free School and Sudbury Valley School. The success of these schools and others like them, as well as the pertinent educational ideas and practices that the free schoolers promoted are still relevant today and warrant further study.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT WAS THE FREE SCHOOLS MOVEMENT?

By *Free School* we mean noncompulsory education. A child is free to choose and develop his own interests at his own rate - within sensible limitations of safety and respect for the rights of others -Celeste School, Corrales, New Mexico, 1969¹

In the midst of extreme political and social turmoil during the 1960s—with the Black Power movement, the civil rights movement, the Red Power movement, the women’s liberation movement, the anti-war movement, the environmental movement and the gay rights movement all in full-swing—there was an unsung movement for radical humanity and freedom in education. Although often unacknowledged in historical accounts, the leaders and participants thought just as deeply about their cause as those who participated in other countercultural social movements, and believed just as fervently that they were on the verge of bringing about a monumental paradigm shift in American culture. This was the free schools movement.

A wide variety of educational reforms and experiments got under way during the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States and the UK. Experimental and free colleges,² open classrooms,³ the British infant schools,⁴ “exploding” classrooms,⁵

¹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 5 (Santa Barbara: 19 May, 1969), 1.

² Reid Pitney Higginson. "When Experimental Was Mainstream: The Rise and Fall of Experimental Colleges, 1957–1979." *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2019): 195-226.

³ Harold W. Sobel, and Edward W. Tejirian. "The Case for Open Education." *Teachers College Record* 74, no. 4 (1973): 559-65.

⁴ Lillian Weber. *The English Infant School and Informal Education*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

⁵ Catherine Burke. "“Fleeting Pockets of Anarchy”: Streetwork. The Exploding School." *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 4 (2014): 433-42.

American Indian Movement survival schools,⁶ the Black Panther Party liberation schools,⁷ Mississippi Freedom schools,⁸ and the wide variety of schools that became known as the “free schools movement”: all of these educational movements gathered strength and blossomed forth with monumental force during the historically tumultuous time period.

The free schools movement rose and fell within an extremely short historical time period, approximately 1967–1972. Educational historian Ron Miller described the rise of the free schools movement within this context: “In the 1960s, the rise of student activism and a radical counterculture created a surge of interest in both the psychological and political aspects of freedom, resulting in a ‘free school’ movement that at its peak included nearly a thousand schools across the U.S.”⁹ He goes on to state how *Summerhill*, an account of the “original” free school in England, published in 1960 by A.S. Neill, became an “influential best seller,” and several other writers and educational critics found widespread popularity as well—writers such as John Holt, George Dennison, Ivan Illich, Jonathan Kozol, and Paul Goodman who “also wrote boldly and passionately about freedom in learning.”¹⁰ Regardless of whether or not the

⁶ Julie L. Davis. *Survival Schools the American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁷ Donna Jean Murch. *Living for the City Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁸ Max A. Hope. *Reclaiming Freedom in Education: Theories and Practices of Radical Free School Education*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2020), 54.

⁹ Ron Miller. *The Self-Organizing Revolution: Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement*. (Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press, 2008) 34.

¹⁰ Miller, *The Self-Organizing Revolution*, 34-35.

free schools movement met the standards as a true social or political “movement,” they thought of themselves as such, and referred to themselves as such within the pages of their primary newsletter, *The New Schools Exchange*.

What happened to the free schools movement, and what legacies have been left by their bold experiments in education? A few free schools survived the demise of the movement, and although public schooling remains largely the same as it was in the 1960s, some options still remain in modern day homeschooling movements and democratic schools. Ultimately, regardless of their idealism and enthusiasm for change, the free schoolers failed to coalesce their efforts into an effective social movement, but their inspiration remains a beacon to many today.

PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THIS HISTORICAL INQUIRY

This statement from Ron Miller, from his 2008 book *The Self-Organizing Revolution: Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement*, gets to the heart of the issue of education that I have wrestled with for the last thirty years:

It is remarkable that as society welcomes visionary innovation in so many other areas, we continue to tolerate this outdated, undemocratic model for bringing our young people into the public world. People who advocate workplace democracy, or local, community based economies, or holistic approaches to healing, personal growth and spirituality generally fail to question the purposes, structures, and methods of our industrial age system of schooling. Even as the business world opens to concepts such as sustainability, participatory creative problem-solving, and social responsibility, business leaders and their political allies press for higher “standards” and tougher “accountability,” turning schools more and more into sweatshops...We now know, just as we know that the earth isn’t flat, that the process of human learning and growth is holistic, creative, and spontaneous. The mechanical management of a child’s learning may serve the ends of a society’s authorities, but it does not support the fullest, healthiest development of that child’s potential intelligence or character.¹¹

¹¹ Miller, *The Self-Organizing Revolution*, 20-21.

Though Miller’s book was published thirteen years ago now, his assessment of the pace of change in so many sectors of society and the lack of change within the state schooling system is still relevant today. When the world is changing so rapidly, when transformation is seen in almost every part of society, why has education been left behind? Why do so many parents, especially those who are entrepreneurial or creative in their working lives, still decide to send their children to be educated in a school system designed in the nineteenth century? It is these and similar questions that have driven me forward in my life and in my educational journey.

I became interested in the history of the free schools movement primarily because it connects directly to my lived experience. Because of the movement, and the schools that survived it, my life has been altered in many profound ways. As an undergraduate pursuing teaching certification in social studies, I discovered kindred spirits in the books of A.S. Neill, George Dennison, John Holt, and others, figures who spoke about children and education in ways that resonated with me deeply. Searching for inspiration for a new school that I wanted to open in the 1990s, I discovered a model of “free school” education that I could emulate in The Sudbury Valley School, opened in 1968 during the free schools movement. Sudbury Valley supported new schools through conferences and an email list-serve, so I gained membership in a community of like-minded individuals who carried on the legacies of the free schools movement. When I helped create a “Sudbury” model school in 1996—Diablo Valley School in Concord, California—and served as its first full-time staff member, I experienced the same highs and lows that the free schoolers wrote about in their newsletter, the *New Schools Exchange*.

When I became a parent, I sent all three of my children to the Clearwater School in Bothell, Washington, another “Sudbury” school founded the same year as Diablo Valley. For twenty years, I supported Clearwater as a devoted committee member, parent, board member, and ultimately as board president. Several students enrolled in Clearwater and Diablo Valley over the years as a direct result of knowing me and my kids. The lives of my three children—now all young adults—and everything about their outlook on life, was significantly influenced by their educational experiences at Clearwater.

My life was deeply influenced by participation in the Clearwater community as well. My ultimate departure from Clearwater in 2019—after several months of community turmoil and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to mediate an appropriate way forward during a major staff dispute—left me more open to questioning the model that I had been so committed to for such a long time. I entered graduate school searching for the answers to questions like: is the Sudbury model the best model of free school education? In what ways has it failed and how would I change it if I could? How did other schools successfully navigate deep divisions and conflict?

Reflecting on my personal history with the free schools of today led me to consider the historical free schools movement. I was curious about why most of the historical free schools were no longer around. Why did so many of them close and why did the movement seem to have died out so suddenly? Why have so many of the surviving free schools (as well as their contemporary kin, like democratic schools) remained on the fringes of the American educational landscape? I knew from personal and anecdotal experience that many of the schools that opened within the last twenty-

five years closed for a variety of reasons—interpersonal issues, which are often disguised as philosophical differences; money troubles; external pressures; lack of enrollment; inability to obtain a suitable site—but I wasn't sure if the free schools of the 1960s and 1970s faced the same issues. I suspect that many of the free schools also closed for similar reasons, and there is evidence in the newsletter to support tension around many of those issues.

As I examined my experience at Clearwater, I started to consider all of the circumstances that make free schools vulnerable to instability and unsustainability. I knew that part of the reason that schools fail to grow or ultimately close down is because of infighting, generally either among the staff or among groups of parents. Thinking more deeply about what I meant by “infighting,” I realized that the evidence I had examined could help me answer questions like what did the free schoolers argue about or struggle to achieve? And why did so many of the schools close so quickly? I may not be able to ascertain school-specific interpersonal issues, but I could definitely get a broad sense of the internal tensions between those within the movement, as well as those external factors that ultimately were too big to overcome.

As a primary-source window into the free schools movement, the *New Schools Exchange* newsletter is full of editorial content and letters which elucidate a variety of conflicts and disagreements from a number of perspectives. Ultimately, if I can shine a light on what the free schoolers agreed on, as well as the friction that existed among them, I can learn more about the potential weaknesses and vulnerabilities that they were subject to. I can also learn more about what they cared about and how they tried to learn from each other. I can highlight the serious educational and philosophical

issues that they debated as evidence that they are worthy of historical mention. Major conflicts can lead to devastation and loss—and often do within a wide variety of ventures and groups—but they can also be potentially powerful learning tools. Through secondary research, as well as digging into the newsletter, I have learned more about what challenges the free schoolers faced, why they argued, and what ultimately led to their failure to gain traction within the mainstream American educational system.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

*The usual argument against freedom for children is this: Life is hard, and we must train the children so that they will fit into life later on. We must therefore discipline them. If we allow them to do what they like, how will they ever be able to serve under a boss? How will they compete with others who have known discipline? How will they ever be able to exercise self-discipline? People who protest the granting of freedom to children and use this argument do not realize that they start with an unfounded, unproven assumption—the **assumption that a child will not grow or develop unless forced to do so.**¹² [my emphasis]*

Although there were dozens of educational writers and speakers who inspired the free schools movement, for this project I have chosen to focus on four of the most influential: A.S. Neill, George Dennison, Jonathan Kozol, and John Holt. I will refer to these four as “influencers” because of their huge impact on the rise of the free schools movement, including the predominance of their names and ideas found in other literature of the time period, including the newsletter I examined, the *New Schools Exchange*. In Chapter One, I will describe who the free schoolers were—who was drawn to start and work in free schools, and what they were looking for. In Chapter Two, I will examine something these free schoolers had in common: the “influencers” and their works. These influencers provided the models and philosophies about child

¹² A.S. Neill. *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. (New York: Hart Publishing Co. 1960) 109.

rearing and education that the free schoolers took as inspiration, as they attempted to put what they read about into practice in their experimental schools.

Chapter Three will focus on the main points of contention among the free schoolers, and some of the practical obstacles that led to the demise of most of the schools, as well as any sense of a “movement.” In Chapter Four, I will consider the legacies of the free schools, including two schools that survived, Sudbury Valley School and the Albany Free School, with an analysis of why I think they made it when so many others did not. I will conclude with my final analysis of what happened to the free schools movement and what we have to learn by studying it.

PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIAL: THE NEW SCHOOLS EXCHANGE NEWSLETTER

Although the influencers had published books, were speaking at events and to the media—and many of them were corresponding via letters and telephone with parents and teachers around the country—by early 1969 there was not yet an established and easy network among which free schoolers on the ground could find out what other people were doing or help each other. Enter the *New Schools Exchange* (NSE). This newsletter is the best primary source material available for research inquiries regarding the free schools movement. In order to determine what happened to the free schools movement, it is important to understand who was involved, how they operated and what they were interested in. The NSE newsletter is a treasure trove of first-hand information which addresses these topics and many more. There are dozens of aspects of the newsletter that would be worthy of further academic investigation and future research. For my purposes, I will begin by using the newsletters to provide some details about who was drawn to the free schools and why, what the primary functions

of the NSE were, how the newsletter was organized, and elucidate how it was important to the movement. Later, the newsletter—particularly the editorial content and letters—will provide the primary insights into my analysis about what sorts of issues drove a wedge into the fledgling movement, and ultimately what led most of the schools to close down rather quickly.

More than just a newsletter publisher, the New Schools Exchange also put on conferences, collected school brochures, and much more. The New Schools Exchange records—an archival collection gifted to Yale University by the New Schools Exchange in 1978—contains the most detailed collection of primary source materials about the free schools movement available to the public. The archive’s finding guide describes the richness of materials collected by the New Schools Exchange:

The New Schools Exchange records document the activities of the New Schools Exchange specifically and the free school movement of the 1960s and 1970s generally. Among files documenting the NSE, the collection includes a complete run of the New Schools Exchange Newsletter, which printed articles, notices, classified advertisements, and other pieces of information relating to individuals, organizations and schools in alternative education. Individual files documenting over seven hundred free schools located around the world but primarily in North America, comprise a large series. The records also hold a broad selection of ephemeral publications relating to educational alternatives that serve to place the activities of the New Schools Exchange into the broader context of the free school movement. The collection also documents the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as related movements for peace, social justice, racial and gender equality, and civil rights.¹³

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person access to the Yale archives was unavailable, so I was unable to physically examine the collection, nor was I able to examine all of the copies of the newsletter. However, I was able to obtain digitized copies of issues #1–83 of the newsletter.

¹³ New Schools Exchange Finding Aid, New Schools Exchange Records, MS 889. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.

Here is one version of the description of the *New Schools Exchange* published quite early on:

The New Schools Exchange tries to do many things. It publishes information on beginning schools, radical educational projects, community schools. It finds jobs for people who want to teach. It turns schools on to students who need schools. It helps locate supplies. It is, in general, a clearing house for anyone involved in experimental education.¹⁴

The New Schools Exchange weekly newsletter became a primary organizing principle and communications tool of the free schoolers and helped them to feel more like part of a movement. It served several purposes: to alert all interested parties about free schools, both existing and forming; to connect job-seeking teachers and administrators with schools that were hiring; to connect school-seeking parents and students with schools that might suit them; to announce conferences and other regional and national events; to maintain a current published list of all known free schools; and later, to promote philosophical and practical discussion and debate among those who were prominent within the free schools movement. In addition, as an educational tool for the subscribers, the NSE published excerpts of position papers which it often sent out in full to subscribers. Ever interested in being a resource to their readers, occasionally they published a bibliography of “works relating, in the broadest sense, to humanistic, free, new, experimental, alternative, etc., education.”¹⁵ It was also read by interested external parties, such as college researchers and psychiatrists.¹⁶ Its primary use as a communications tool between and among the hundreds of small

¹⁴ *New Schools Exchange*, no.10 (Santa Barbara: 17 July, 1969), 1.

¹⁵ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 55 (Santa Barbara: [1971?]), 2-12.

¹⁶ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 47 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 3.

schools, potential teachers, parents, and students cannot be overstated—the NSE was the primary connector for the free schools movement.

The New Schools Exchange was started as a result of the first conference of the free schools, The Conference on New Schools, held March 14-15, 1969 at Peninsula School in Menlo Park, CA. Issue #4 details highlights from the conference, and states that the conference “brought together representatives from more than fifty schools.”¹⁷ The publishers were located in Santa Barbara, CA, and the first issue was published Monday, April 21, 1969.¹⁸ Harvey Haber was the publisher, and a handful of others were listed as contributing editors, including Peter Marin, Mike Rossman, Cass Haber, Joyce Nicolait, Tim Affleck, Frank Goad, Pauline Holt, and Robert Greenway.¹⁹ Many of the free schools projects were located in California, and these are the ones that are primarily highlighted within the first few issues of the newsletter. However, the NSE soon came to include letters and classified advertisements for schools from cities, small towns, and rural areas across the US and Canada. The goal of the weekly newsletter was to help new schools by providing a way for them to communicate with each other and to provide inspiration, as well as to help students, teachers, and parents find schools to work at, attend, or enroll their kids. It was to “provide a clearing house for resources and information” for all interested parties.²⁰

To illustrate some of the issues that the free schoolers were initially interested in, it is worth noting some of the topics discussed during that first conference:

¹⁷ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 4 (Santa Barbara: 12 May, 1969), 2.

¹⁸ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 1 (Santa Barbara: 21 April, 1969), 1.

¹⁹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 51 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 2.

²⁰ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 4 (Santa Barbara: 12 May, 1969), 2.

- How do you finance a new school?
- How is a new school organized?
- How can public and new schools talk to each other?
- What expectations should a new school have?
- What assumptions about children and parents do new schools make?
- Can there be a dialogue between new schools? (Where do we go from here?)
- What is the role of the encounter group in the classroom?
- An all Black School, can it succeed in American society?²¹

By the end of the conference, the group had decided to form the *New Schools Exchange*, form a New Schools Foundation, and to continue the conference on an annual basis.²²

In the first issue, the publishers called for those who had schools and other interested individuals to remit payment for subscriptions: \$5 per month per school and \$1 per month per individual. They quickly dropped the asking price to \$1 per month for all or “whatever you can afford.”²³ After the first few months, the newsletter came up with a standard description which they published in each issue:

The New Schools Exchange is the only central resource and learning house for all people involved in alternatives in education. The Exchange corresponds with thousands of individuals and hundreds of experimental schools and educational reform groups across the United States and Canada. Major spokesmen for educational reform are contributors to the Newsletter, issued 3 times a month. Subscription to the Exchange is 10 dollars for 12 months. There is a minimum subscription of \$5 for 5 months. Subscription titles you to the Newsletter, the continuing Directory of New Schools, periodic ‘position papers’ free ad insertion in the Newsletter and any other aid we can extend in the area of experimental education.²⁴

The newsletter initially included these sections in each issue: “seeking schools” for staff, students, and parents looking for a school; “seeking staff or students” from new

²¹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 4 (Santa Barbara: 12 May, 1969), 2.

²² *New Schools Exchange*, no. 4 (Santa Barbara: 12 May, 1969), 3.

²³ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 4 (Santa Barbara: 12 May, 1969), 2.

²⁴ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 37 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 7.

schools; letters or communications directly from the publisher; descriptions of free schools and their desires or needs; and always a plea for subscription payment.

The first twenty-three issues of the newsletter were generally just a few pages long, printed on colored paper and lacking in photographs or a cover. Initially, it was published weekly, though later on it went to 2-3x/month. With issue #9, the printing quality became much better, as the newsletter moved to a new location. Starting with issue #14, a cover was added. Starting with issue #30, the newsletter added a photograph on the cover, and sometimes there was an additional one or two photographs within as well.²⁵

It is difficult to ascertain the dates of the later issues, since starting with issue #29, the newsletter began publishing in a magazine style, with the issue number on the cover, but no date of publication. The switch to a magazine style was done in order to include more editorial content, in response to a call from the readership for more critical content.²⁶ At this same time, the newsletter increased in volume to a standard of eight pages per issue. With issue #41, the newsletter increased again to twelve pages per issue, which remained fairly standard throughout the rest of the issues I was able to examine.

As the newsletter developed over time, it started to carry essays or letters from some of the most well-known advocates for the free schools, including Peter Marin, John Holt, and George Dennison. Starting with issue #48, Marin gained a regular column where he took the newsletter in a new direction by probing many philosophical and practical issues of the free schools movement. It also added a highlights section

²⁵ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 30 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 1.

²⁶ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 28 (Santa Barbara: [1969?]), 2.

entitled “Good Things,” which often listed films or other noteworthy resources, as well as a “Conferences” section meant to begin to capture all of the local and regional conferences, and a “Kids Seeking Places” section for youth who were looking for free schools to attend.

Readers were asked to respond to the essays or letters, and they often did. For example, John Holt inspired a slew of responses when he published a blistering letter damning psychologists and teachers for pushing drugs onto kids who were diagnosed and labeled with “hyperkinesis,”²⁷ an antecedent to the modern-day ADD or ADHD diagnosis. Responses to his impassioned letter started arriving in the following newsletter and continued for several issues.²⁸

CHAPTER ONE: WHO WERE THE FREE SCHOOLERS?

Although there were divisions among the free schoolers—those who put the advice and pedagogies of the “influencers” into practice—there is evidence that first, those who were attracted to the movement had a lot in common as individuals, and second, they had a common enemy in public schooling. Understanding who was attracted to the free schools movement and why can help us to understand some of the later divisions among their ranks, and why so many of them were unable to keep the schools open that they started.

²⁷ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 46 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 2.

²⁸ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 52 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 2.

THE YOUNG SEEKERS: “PEOPLE SEEKING PLACES”

After reading hundreds of NSE ads for prospective “teachers” looking for work at free schools, I can say the following about these would-be educators. They were almost universally under thirty years old, the majority closer to twenty or twenty-five. They were well educated—the vast majority held bachelors degrees, and many held master’s degrees as well. In fact, it is notable how highly educated these young people seeking to work in free schools were. Even though they were seeking to upend many of society’s stringencies, I found it noteworthy that so many of them listed their BA and MA credentials, often from highly selective colleges and universities. It seems paradoxical that they were on the one hand, against credentialism, and on the other, still firmly tied to the convention of naming their credentials when seeking employment. Their degrees were in a broad range of subject areas, spanning the humanities, social sciences, history, sciences, math, and the arts. It should be noted that the NSE also served the blossoming movement of experimental and free colleges, and some of the more highly educated young seekers were hoping to gain employment teaching at the college level.

Here are two examples of a typical ad placed in the newsletter by those seeking jobs at free schools:

Ben and Susan Campbell, 70 Waverly Rd., Indian Neck, Branford, Conn. Ben: B.A. in English, Yale University June 1970. Also have formal background in philosophy. Interested in teaching high school level. Susan: B.A. in English, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, June 1970. Interested in teaching elementary or high school level. Experience in community work with teenagers; will go anywhere; available anytime after early June: salary requirements low. We want to be in a school where the people in it are as free as possible.²⁹

²⁹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 31 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 6.

Larry Dunlap, 6705 S. Riverside Dr., Marine City, Mich. 48039. Tired of public school restrictions; would like to join free learning community. I have taught 3 years H.S. and have had drama, Peace Corps training and wilderness experience. My wife has taught 1 1/2 yrs H.S. plus Upward Bound, music and drama, experience in teaching math and science.³⁰

Many of the job-seekers had earned teaching degrees, though most of them had little-to-no experience teaching in schools. Quite a few of them turned away from public school teaching altogether after having a horrible experience during their student teaching, and many more quit the public schools after just one or two years. Other noteworthy aspects of the young job-seekers were that some of them came from recent volunteer backgrounds with either VISTA or the Peace Corps, and they also expressed a wide variety of experiences with children and teenagers in a huge array of settings, from working at camps, mental institutions, and with disabled children, to teaching Sunday school. Ideologically, they most often expressed interest in human potential, the environment, and human relations.

What were these young, prospective teachers looking for when they sent in their ads to the NSE? Primarily, they were looking to get away from a competitive, de-humanizing educational system. They suspected that there had to be better, non-coercive ways to educate, to relate to children and adolescents, and they wanted to see if they could find them. They had read about all of the new free schools in the newsletter and they were anxious to find a place for themselves at one of them. Most of them were looking for a way to be of use in changing the wider culture, and they thought they could do it through education. They professed strong desires to learn and

³⁰ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 33 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 6.

grow with children and adolescents, to work and live in community, and to learn more about self-directed learning environments. All were looking for a school where they had more freedom to participate in more equal or “authentic” relationships with students.

Here are some excerpts from a few more ads:

“What we want is meaningful work...Essentially, we want to be somewhere where the people are people.”³¹

“The most essential requirement for a job is that I not be forced to do anything I don’t feel is right, and that I don’t have to force, threaten, or coerce my students in any way.”³²

“I want to allow children to have a good time learning. I wish to enjoy and learn from both the people I work for and the children I work with.”³³

Quite a large proportion of the job-seekers were looking for rural or farm opportunities—communes or “back-to-the-land” scenarios commonly had a free school aspect to them—and these were popular requests within the ads. Most often, they asked for little or no salary, just room and board and enough to cover their basic expenses. Many offered to work for room and board only, which would be all that most of the schools could offer anyway. A few mentioned needing enough income to pay back student loans. Interestingly, though the age range was primarily early twenties, quite a large portion of the ads were for a husband/wife duo, hoping for a place for both of them at a school, and often hoping for a place for their small children as well. In addition, some of the ads that the free schools ran actually stated that they preferred to have a couple, so one can imagine that there were many matches made in this way!

Here are some more excerpts:

³¹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 37 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 6.

³² *New Schools Exchange*, no. 37 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 6.

³³ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 37 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 6.

“Unfortunate experience with the Public School student teaching program forced the realization of the necessity for me to work with an innovative school. ..New England or West Coast preferred.”³⁴

“I feel that creativity should be encouraged, significant learning stems from exploring one’s interests, and that a teacher’s role is not analogous to that of a dictator or final arbitrator of “truth.”³⁵

One aspect of the newsletter that I had not come across in any secondary sources was the number of ads from Conscientious Objectors (COs) from the Vietnam war. These COs were looking for placement at free schools in order to comply with government regulations, especially in the early issues of the newsletter. Issue #2 of the NSE gave great detail into who Conscientious Objectors were, and how to go about hiring one for your free school.³⁶ COs were a source of free labor to the free schools.³⁷ How did their presence affect the children and the schools where they ended up teaching? How would the free schools movement have been different without these sources of free labor? It’s difficult to get a sense of the answers to these questions, primarily because we don’t see from the newsletters how many of them got hired or where they worked. This topic deserves further study—at no other time in recent history has there been such a pool of young people looking to avoid war service by volunteering to do alternative service, and I am left wondering how the phenomenon of COs looking for work in free schools affected the schools themselves, as well as the movement.

³⁴ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 39 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 6.

³⁵ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 39 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 7.

³⁶ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 1 (Santa Barbara: 21 April, 1969), 1-4.

³⁷ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 1 (Santa Barbara: 21 April, 1969), 2.

What analysis can be gleaned about those who started free schools and those who were drawn to work in them? Because of the overwhelming youth of the population of founders and teachers at free schools, there was an abundance of energy, hopefulness and excitement, which allowed for hundreds of schools to open very quickly over a short time frame. Some schools were even started by high school students, who were fed up with their own schools and didn't see any other options but to do it themselves.³⁸ There is a lot of repetition in the newsletter about the unglamorous aspects of being a free schools teacher—long hours, low or no pay, philosophical disagreements with parents—all the ingredients for quick burn-out. Having had no models or training in free schooling, the teachers were almost completely inexperienced in working with children in a free school situation; many were not up to the challenge of trying to teach within a new paradigm while concurrently dealing with parents, finding a building to meet in, planning programs, figuring out democratic decision-making processes, paying the rent, keeping the books, and so on.

There was criticism of these young seekers, particularly by Jonathan Kozol and others who described them as largely white, privileged, and unserious about helping the children of the poor—particularly inner-city Black and brown children. Here's an example in a letter from a Washington D.C. educator, "Dropping out of the system is an alright thing to do. You do have your own psyche to protect. But what about all the kids in that system who don't have options? Can you turn your back on them? What is the price of your narcissism?"³⁹ Given how many of them were seeking rural locations, there may be some truth to this accusation. There was definitely a sense that many

³⁸ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 59 (Santa Barbara: [1971?]), 8.

³⁹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 41 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 8.

young people were interested in fleeing cities that were in economic and social crisis. However, rural communities wanted free schools too. Here is an excerpt from another letter, “Learning alternatives have to be created for rural adolescents too. All kids and teachers need to be liberated from the atrocities of secondary education. But reformers and radicals alike must admit, in their rhetoric and their action, that twenty million rural kids do exist, and that they matter.”⁴⁰

It is difficult to get an idea of just how many resources these young people had to fall back on if they were unsuccessful in finding jobs at a free school (or even if they did, since there was very little, if any money to be made doing so). How many of them had rich or middle-class parents to whom they could return if things didn’t work out at the free school or hippie commune that they left home for? It is impossible to say from looking at this evidence. However, given that the vast majority of them had advanced degrees, one could suppose that many of them did hail from the middle class. Most of them were seeking to disrupt middle class values or at least to escape them for a time. Further study would be needed to follow up on what happened to all of these young, bright-eyed, potential free school teachers.

To better understand some of the conflicts that later developed within the movement, I’m going to start by examining something that the free schoolers had in common: the best-selling educational authors and speakers that almost all of them would have been reading, listening to, and debating. From these “influencers”, the free schoolers got the ideas for and the encouragement to start their own schools and educational experiments.

⁴⁰ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 42 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 2.

CHAPTER TWO: WHO WERE THE PRIMARY INFLUENCERS OF THE FREE SCHOOLS MOVEMENT?

*My motto for the home, in education as in life, is this: for heaven's sake, let people live their own lives. It is an attitude that fits any situation.*⁴¹

A.S. NEILL

A.S. Neill was the founder and headmaster of Summerhill school, and the author of *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. Published in the US in 1960, the book could be said to have sparked the fire of the free schools movement more than any other publication. It sold more than three million copies by the end of the decade, and Summerhill, founded in 1921 in Leiston, England, was widely referred to as the “original” free school. For a time, there were several schools and organizations in the United States using “Summerhill” in their names, including the Summerhill Society based in Los Angeles, and some of the most long-lasting and influential free schools attribute Summerhill and Neill as important influences.⁴²

Neill was already in his eighties by the time of the free schools movement, so he didn't travel much, but he maintained correspondence with and hosted visitors from the free schools movement. For example, Neill wrote a note to the *New Schools Exchange*, published in their 13th issue on August 9, 1969: “Thank you for the information on all the new schools in America. It sounds exciting. I am only sorry that I will not be able to visit them all. At age 85, travel is difficult. Good luck to you. A.S. Neill”⁴³

⁴¹ Neill, *Summerhill*, 123.

⁴² *New Schools Exchange*, no. 56 (Santa Barbara: [1971?]), 7.

⁴³ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 13 (Santa Barbara: 9 August, 1969), 1.

Summerhill operates at its most basic level with trust in the self-regulation of the students. Neill stated that, “in the main, Summerhill runs along without any authority or any obedience. Each individual is free to do what he likes *as long as he is not trespassing on the freedom of others*. And this is a reasonable aim in any community.”⁴⁴ This became a fundamental principle of many of the free schools as well. Neill believed that children were naturally good. As for the purpose of education, he stated, “I hold that the aim of life is to find happiness, which means to find interest. Education should be a preparation for life. Our culture has not been very successful. Our education, politics, and economics lead to war.”⁴⁵ Neill believed that the freedom to pursue what they were interested in—and to play for as long as they liked—led students at Summerhill to well-being.

Neill thought that education must be both intellectual and emotional, and that well-adjusted children would grow up to be well-adjusted adults. In this way, he was an idealist, and hoped that when the Summerhill children grew up they would *not* perpetuate the cycles of violence and materialism that were destroying the world. Neill strongly felt that education needed to heal the split between the heart and the intellect that had become so prevalent in modern education, which focuses almost exclusively on the intellect.

Critics deemed Neill’s over-emphasis on the emotional and creative aspects of education as anti-intellectual, but he fought back by stating, “I am not decrying learning. But learning should come after play. And learning should not be deliberately seasoned with play to make it palatable...this notion that unless a child is learning

⁴⁴ Neill, *Summerhill*, 155.

⁴⁵ Neill, *Summerhill*, 24.

something the child is wasting his time is nothing less than a curse—a curse that blinds thousands of teachers and most school inspectors.”⁴⁶

Play was a foundational part of education at Summerhill. Neill thought that schooled children had much less time for uninterrupted play than they should have, and even adolescents suffered from a dearth of opportunities to play. He felt so strongly about this that he wrote, “One could, with some truth, claim that the evils of civilization are due to the fact that no child has ever had enough play.”⁴⁷ He also contended that excessive punishment of children was a hindrance to emotional well-being, and that it should be avoided by parents and schools alike because dogmatic and harsh discipline and punishment create fear in children, and that fear creates hostility.⁴⁸ Neill thought that adults spent far too much time projecting fear of the future onto children and that this fear is at the root of the deprivation of children’s fundamental need to play for as long and as deeply as they want to.

The most pertinent construction of Neill’s main argument regarding this topic is as follows: “People who protest the granting of freedom to children and use this argument do not realize that they start with an unfounded, unproven assumption—the *assumption that a child will not grow or develop unless forced to do so.*”⁴⁹ This is an assumption that, over my thirty years of discussing the philosophy of free schools with hundreds of adults, I have found that most adults have a hard time accepting. In American and British culture, we are brought up and schooled to believe that adults

⁴⁶ Neill, *Summerhill*, 26.

⁴⁷ Neill, *Summerhill*, 64.

⁴⁸ Neill, *Summerhill*, 161.

⁴⁹ Neill, *Summerhill*, 109.

must be overly involved in the growth of the child—and that children must be coerced and forced to “learn”—*but what if this simply were not the case?* This principle of freedom to grow and develop without coercion, and according to the individual needs and desires of the child, is a crucial one to understand in regard to the free schools movement, as they experimented with practices of educational trust and freedom within their schools.

One of the most influential underlying principles at Summerhill would be what Neill called “freedom without license.” Students were free to attend lessons or not; they were free to spend their time as they wished, as long as they did not impede on the freedom of others to do the same. Freedom did *not* mean that they could do absolutely whatever they wanted, but it did mean that they had a great deal of leeway as to what they could do. They also were prohibited from pursuing activities that might endanger the existence of the school. Neill also interpreted this idea to mean that neither children nor adults should coerce or manipulate each other—that both should have mutual respect between them. Finally, this freedom was meant to encompass the respect for all community members, regardless of age.

On the foundations of the school, Neill wrote that, “When my wife and I began the school, we had one main idea: *to make the school fit the child*—instead of making the child fit the school. All it required was what we had—a complete belief in the child as a good, not an evil, being. For almost forty years, this belief in the goodness of the child has never wavered; it rather has become a final faith.”⁵⁰ A deep belief and trust in the wisdom of children was also at the heart of a Summerhill education, and Neill

⁵⁰ Neill, *Summerhill*, 4.

strongly believed that “a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing.”⁵¹

This core belief is what later guided Neill’s followers in the free schools movement, and it has guided Summerhill for one hundred years.

GEORGE DENNISON

Although George Dennison’s book, *The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School*, was not published until the middle of the movement, in 1969, it too had a profound effect on the conversations and activities of the free schoolers. The book was a passionate, articulate, and heart-felt account of Dennison’s ideas about education, gleaned primarily through his work as a founder and teacher at The First Street School in New York City.⁵² Many free schools attributed Dennison’s book and The First Street School as a huge influence on their own projects. Though not a frequent contributor, Dennison also wrote to *The New Schools Exchange*, and participated in conferences as well. Although Dennison and his family moved to rural Maine shortly after the book was published, *The Lives of Children* remained influential for many decades.

George Dennison and his soon-to-be wife Mabel Chrystie started the First Street School in New York City’s lower east side in 1964. Mabel had worked as a reading teacher in New York City and, inspired by A.S. Neill, had left to teach at a boarding school in upstate New York founded by a former Summerhill student and teacher,

⁵¹ Neill, *Summerhill*, 4.

⁵² George Dennison. *The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969).

Robert Barker.⁵³ She taught at that school for three years and then, convinced that some of the same principles could apply with urban children, left to found a community or “street” school back in the city. That school was eventually named the First Street School and it was open for two years. It served mainly the Black and Puerto Rican families who lived in the neighborhood, charged no tuition, and relied primarily on grant money and other private sources of funding to survive. This is one of the main reasons that it eventually shut down, as did most of the other free schools opened during the 1960s.

After the school closed, Dennison wrote about the people of the First Street School—their trials, tribulations, and triumphs—in his masterpiece, *The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School*. When asked why he wrote the book, Dennison replied, “In the book I wanted to expose the individual human reality behind these statistics [reports of failing schools and student drop-outs]. And - that's what mattered even more to me: I wanted to show that the damage to the personality that our students suffer from can be healed. Our students made tremendous progress in both character development and learning.”⁵⁴

According to Ron Miller, the author of *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy after the 1960s*, and the primary historian of the free schools movement, Dennison,

...sought to understand [the students'] world and their struggles, and to make their education responsive to the actual needs of their lives. He described an educational approach that was concerned with the wholeness of human experience, and his writing

⁵³ Rainer Winkel. Gestaltpädagogik: Interview With George Dennison. Accessed May 03, 2021, http://gestalt.de/dennison_interview.html.

⁵⁴ Rainer Winkel. Gestaltpädagogik: Interview With George Dennison. Accessed May 03, 2021, http://gestalt.de/dennison_interview.html.

reflected his search for balance, harmony, and openness to a wide range of feelings, ideas, and actions. Like Neill, he demanded freedom for young people—but then he was careful to define freedom in relation to the communal and social context without which freedom has no meaning.⁵⁵

Dennison’s focus on the exquisite humanity in the community of the First Street School, and his moving descriptions of the lives of the children and the adults there, proved to be immensely compelling to readers.

Miller wrote of the book, “Dennison’s argument for libertarian education is rooted in these children’s lives, not in some sociological critique or romantic utopian vision. The First Street School comes alive in a way that Neill’s Summerhill does not.”⁵⁶ Miller also refers to Dennison’s grounding of his ideas about children and education, “in a historical intellectual tradition—specifically Dewey’s philosophy of experience.”⁵⁷ Miller states that it was this philosophy—neither too anti-authority or too anti-intellectual—that allowed Dennison to “[bridge] the split between the “political” and “existential” (or romantic) elements of free school ideology.”⁵⁸

Admittedly inspired by Dewey and his focus on the daily experiential lives of children, when asked about the fundamental pedagogy of The First Street School and the free schools movement during an interview in 1973, Dennison replied,

None other than the fundamental rationality and vigor of community life... Small groups of children and adults come together, look for a place or a house, and teach and learn together: they tell stories, dance, sing, make music, paint, explore their surroundings ... These are the original forms of scientific and

⁵⁵ Ron Miller. *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy after the 1960s*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002) 58.

⁵⁶ Miller, *Free Schools, Free People*, 59.

⁵⁷ Miller, *Free Schools, Free People*, 59.

⁵⁸ Miller, *Free Schools, Free People*, 60.

artistic activities. Experiencing life unadulterated - that is the pedagogy of the Free Schools.⁵⁹

Dennison spent a large portion of his book promoting the value of relationships in education. For example, when reconsidering schools, he stated:

If, as parents, we were to take as our concern not the instruction of our children, but the lives of our children, we would find that our schools could be used in a powerfully regenerative way...We might cease thinking of school as a place, and learn to believe that it is basically relationships: between children and adults, adults and adults, children and other children.⁶⁰

The Lives of Children was published in 1969, close to the zenith of the free schools movement. With the introduction written by John Holt, another of the influencers, the book was well received and published in at least ten different languages. George Dennison, like most of his contemporaries in the free schools movement, found much about traditional public and private schooling that appalled him: "Why is it, then, that so many children fail? Let me put it bluntly: it is because our system of public education is a horrendous, life-destroying mess. The destruction is primary."⁶¹

In his book, Dennison highlighted issues like the dehumanization of children in public schools, a lack of friendly relations between teachers and students, and a lack of trust in children's abilities, among others. These were some of the foundational issues that rallied the free schoolers together.

⁵⁹ Rainer Winkel. Gestaltpädagogik: Interview With George Dennison. Accessed May 03, 2021, http://gestalt.de/dennison_interview.html.

⁶⁰ Dennison, *The Lives of Children*, 6-7.

⁶¹ Dennison, *The Lives of Children*, 74.

JONATHAN KOZOL

Jonathan Kozol wrote about his experience starting a free school in a poor, Black Boston neighborhood in his book, *Free Schools*, published in 1972.⁶² Kozol was already a prolific contributor to the public conversations about education in urban schools, having won the National Book Award in 1968 for his first book, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools*.⁶³ He was published in contemporary media sources like the *Saturday Review*,⁶⁴ attended conferences and wrote to the *New Schools Exchange* as well. For example, in issue #35 his short letter took aim at the Sudbury Valley School, stating, “I wonder if a lot of these people, in doing their beautiful thing with their beautiful children in their beautiful country communes, are not in fact turning their back totally on political realities...and the rotting people in the cities”⁶⁵ This is fairly standard Kozol, as his views on education were often quite at odds with many of the free schoolers, though he certainly was widely respected.

Kozol did not contain his disdain for those free schoolers of the counterculture who were not working in the inner cities with poor and struggling people of color. When discussing the struggles of the impoverished urban parents he knew in Boston, Kozol wrote,

Men and women who are locked into such lives as these cannot be expected to look without uneasiness or even without considerable alarm at those who tell

⁶² Jonathan Kozol. *Free Schools*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

⁶³ “National Book Awards 1968,” National Book Foundation, March 6, 2018, <https://www.nationalbook.org/awards-prizes/national-book-awards-1968/>.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Kozol, “Free Schools: A Time for Candor.” *Saturday Review* 55 (10): 51–54.

⁶⁵ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 35 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 5.

them that their children do not need degrees, do not need math or English, do not need to find out how to psyche out an exam, do not need college, do not need money, do not need ugly, contaminated, wicked, vulgar, middle-class “success.” The issue for the children that I have in mind is not success. It is survival.⁶⁶

The philosophy of freedom to “do your own thing” that the Summerhillian-type schools thought was important was worse than nonsense to Kozol, who claimed that,

The true, moral, political and semantic derivation of “Free School” lies in “Freedom School.” It is to the liberation, to the vision and to the potency of the oppressed that any Free School worth its derivation and its photographs of Neill, Tolstoi or Eldridge Cleaver must, in the long run, be accountable. If we lose this, in my judgement, we lose everything.⁶⁷

For Kozol, confronting racism and poverty through providing better educational opportunities for urban youth was essential, and the only ethical choice one could make given the circumstances of poverty and oppression that existed. Instead of supporting those who chose to leave the oppressive public education system voluntarily, Kozol was focused on those who were pushed out—poor, Black and brown students—and getting them back into the system. Anything else was just privileged white kids playing games in the country, and he berated anyone who was not participating in his idea of the correct way to address educational inequalities.

JOHN HOLT

John Holt’s influence and involvement can be seen in almost every aspect of the free schools movement. Holt’s books *How Children Fail*, published in 1964, and *How Children Learn*, published in 1967, were extremely influential during the 1960s. Although Holt later became convinced that schooling had no place in learning—and

⁶⁶ Kozol, *Free Schools*, 41.

⁶⁷ Kozol, *Free Schools*, 50.

became known as a founder of the modern homeschooling movement— particularly “unschooling”—during the 1960s he was still talking about and involved in efforts to help children learn better in schools, based on his earlier experiences as a fourth-grade schoolteacher.

Holt’s name appeared regularly, and he was a frequent contributor to *The New Schools Exchange*. He wrote several letters and reviews for the NSE, and is mentioned as an inspiration for new schools, as well as a frequent guest speaker at conferences.⁶⁸ He also corresponded with hundreds of people in the movement, and, with a group including Dennison and Kozol, helped start a fundraising effort for the free schools called the New Nation Seed Fund.⁶⁹ Later on, Holt started a popular magazine among homeschoolers called *Growing Without Schooling*.⁷⁰ Since Holt’s death in 1985, his work has been maintained and extended by writer/editors Pat Farenga, Susannah Sheffer, and several others through Holt Associates.⁷¹ Sheffer’s collection of Holt’s letters, *A Life Worth Living: Selected Letters of John Holt*, published in 1991, is particularly notable, because it shows the extent of the people whom Holt corresponded with, and gives a very personal view into his thoughts and ideas and how they changed tremendously over time.⁷²

⁶⁸ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 13 (Santa Barbara: 9 August, 1969), 1.

⁶⁹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 49 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 2.

⁷⁰ "About Growing Without Schooling." John Holt GWS. Accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.johnholtgws.com/growing-without-schooling-issue-archive>.

⁷¹ "John Holt GWS." John Holt GWS. Accessed June 01, 2021. <https://www.johnholtgws.com/>.

⁷² John Caldwell Holt and Susannah Sheffer. *A Life Worth Living: Selected Letters of John Holt*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990).

In the Introduction to *A Life Worth Living*, Sheffer shed some light on why Holt's first book, *How Children Fail*, was such a hit with readers:

To the thousands and millions of readers of *How Children Fail* who found in the book confirmation of their own school experience, Holt was one of the first to see through educational jargon and theory and to write about what life in school was really like for children and teachers. People reading it and remembering their own childhood found, often for the first time, someone who said that disliking school made sense. Students and teachers who had suspected that something was wrong but had not been able to say what it was found someone who could articulate it for them.⁷³

Holt's work in classrooms, and his subsequent feelings of responsibility to discover why his students had so much trouble learning what he was trying to teach them drove his inquiry. He said, "If my students weren't learning what I was teaching it was my job to find out why."⁷⁴ He also claimed that most teachers had not asked the question, "of all the things we teachers do, which help learning and which prevent it?" because they were operating under the mistaken assumption that "all teaching produces learning."⁷⁵ Not only did he fault teachers for not asking the right questions about learning, he claimed that neither educators nor psychologists sufficiently observed children or understood what children were like at all.⁷⁶

What Holt discovered through observation, interaction, and trial-and-error in his classroom, was that there were two main reasons why children did not learn: teaching and fear. Later on, he added lack of trust. First, Holt claimed that the incredible natural capacity that young children have for learning and growth is crushed by schooling, and

⁷³ Holt & Sheffer, *A Life Worth Living*, 3.

⁷⁴ Holt, *How Children Fail*, 2.

⁷⁵ Holt, *How Children Fail*, 54.

⁷⁶ Holt, *How Children Learn*, 259.

that their natural abilities to learn and grow were stunted by teachers who thought it was their “duty and [their] right to tell children what they must learn.”⁷⁷ He stated,

We adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity of children by the things we do to them or make them do. We destroy this capacity above all by making them afraid, afraid of not doing what other people want, of not pleasing, of making mistakes, of failing, of being wrong. Thus, we make them afraid to gamble, afraid to experiment, afraid to try the difficult and the unknown...We kill, not only their curiosity, but their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious.⁷⁸

Holt described the fear that develops in schoolchildren in response to the coercive atmosphere of schools, stating that, “fear is the inseparable companion of coercion, and its’ inescapable consequence,”⁷⁹ and that when children are afraid, they cannot learn.⁸⁰ He also described all of the ways that children experience schooling: a place where you go and “do what they tell you to do,” a place where daydreaming is the only escape, a place of dishonesty where “we present ourselves to children as if we were gods, all-knowing, all-powerful, always rational, always just, always right. This is worse than any lie we could tell about ourselves.”⁸¹ As a result, by perpetrating the institution of schooling we were damaging curiosity, trust and self-confidence in the children. Sadly, Holt reported that “the worst damage we do...is to the children’s own confidence and self-esteem, their belief that others trust them to learn and that they can therefore trust themselves.”⁸² Holt believed that, not only must this trust be

⁷⁷ Holt, *How Children Fail*, 293-294.

⁷⁸ Holt, *How Children Fail*, 274-275.

⁷⁹ Holt, *How Children Fail*, 294.

⁸⁰ Holt, *How Children Learn*, xv.

⁸¹ Holt, *How Children Fail*, 281.

⁸² Holt, *How Children Learn*, 137.

restored, but that giving children access to the real world of adults and allowing them to chart their own course in it was the way forward for education.⁸³ Though he called for trusting children, he acknowledged the difficulties in doing so among most adults: “Trust children. Nothing could be more simple—or more difficult. Difficult, because to trust children we must trust ourselves—and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted.”⁸⁴ I suspect that the free schoolers encountered these very difficulties as they attempted to carry out Holt’s advice in their free schools.

The ideas of these influencers provided the intellectual backbone for the free schools movement. Through their books, editorial contributions, and speaking engagements, the influencers grounded the experiments of the free schoolers with common points of reference. Their words inspired people to take on the daunting task of starting their own schools—something easier said than done.

CHAPTER THREE: DISAGREEMENTS AND OBSTACLES

*We flounder in the space between the vision of education and the pragmatic reality of the schools.*⁸⁵

PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENTS

Kozol, Neill, Holt and Dennison were some of the most influential leaders in the free schools movement, but how did those who read and listened to their words, and were moved to act by starting their own schools, put the ideas they had read about into practice? Many thousands of overwhelmingly young, well-educated Americans

⁸³ Holt, *How Children Learn*, 151.

⁸⁴ Holt, *How Children Learn*, xii.

⁸⁵ Peter Marin. "The Free School Nonmovement: Has Imagination Outstripped Reality?" *Saturday Review* 55, no. 30 (July 22, 1972): 40-44.

sought to address the issues they found with public schools, as well as with the mass culture, through the founding of small “free schools.” However, it turns out that there were fundamental differences in philosophy of social change that led to a wide variety of interpretations of how to implement the ideas of the influencers in practice. In addition, there was a mountain of practical hurdles to success that most groups did not overcome.

In reality, there were only a few primary points of agreement within the free schools movement: a universal distaste for the structure, methods, and results of traditional public schooling, and the idea of a more free, more humane form of education for young people. As Robert Barr wrote in “Whatever Happened to the Free School Movement?”:

While the free school movement has always included a wide assortment of very different kinds of schools, they have always been held together by two common characteristics: All the sponsors were attempting to escape public education and create something new and better, and all endorse the “idea” of freedom. But from the beginning there were two basic kinds of free schools, each with a conception of freedom that was at best contradictory. On the one hand were the predominantly white middle- and upper-class free schools in which the coercion, regimentation, and authoritarian atmosphere of the public schools was replaced with the free learning environment of “do-your-own-thing” pedagogy. The other group of schools, usually poor, black, and inner-city, might better be described as community-control schools. Related historically to the earlier civil-rights freedom schools, these free schools typify the larger struggle of minority groups against racist institutions and have been set up by parents to liberate their children from the “indoctrination and destruction” of the public schools. These community schools are the antithesis of the “classical” free school, usually having a good deal of structure, required classes, and intensive drill in basic skills.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Robert D. Barr, “Whatever Happened to the Free School Movement,” *The Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1973.

This summary of the differences between the two different “types” of free schools helps to elucidate some of the fundamental philosophical differences that existed among the free schoolers. On the one hand, those who were influenced by Neill, Holt, and Summerhill were primarily concerned about the freedom and autonomy of the individual child. In this model of education—widely replicated by the majority of the free schools found within the pages of the NSE—freedom from repression, intimidation, punishment, and the squashing of the spirit and natural curiosity of the child was fundamental. Through the provision of an environment where children could play, learn, and grow free from coercion, these free schools were supposed to be incubators for happy, well-adjusted adults down the line. This was the goal of the “Summerhillian” schools.

On the other end of the spectrum from the “Summerhillian” schools, Kozol’s definition of “free school” was one in which the primary goal was to help poor, inner-city, usually Black and brown children to succeed in school so that they could go on to college and improve their social and economic circumstances. These schools were primarily organized by poor parents in cities whose children were often driven to drop out of public schools by discriminatory practices and racist structures. The schools were not meant to provide freedom in the way that the Summerhillian schools were—that is, the students did not have free choice over their time in school—they were meant to be free to attend, as those whom they were meant to help would not have been able to afford tuition. Kozol and those like him argued that the best way to change society was to change the circumstances of the lives of those who had the least and suffered the most from the educational system. Once Black and brown

students were made to feel welcome and supported, and given intense practical help in acquiring the skills that they had missed out on in schools, they could make their way up the ladder to a better future.

The fundamental issue at stake here is this: all of the free schoolers were interested in changing society. However, they had greatly different outlooks on what needed to be done in order to accomplish this goal and what they even wanted that society to look like. Getting Black kids to graduate from high school so that they can go to college and get out of poverty is a *much* different proposition than letting kids run around an estate in the country to “grow up free” and thus become free and happy adults. The Summerhillians firmly believed that the primary goal should be to change how the culture raised and educated children and that that would lead to the outcome of a world with more well-adjusted adults less prone to violence, war, and destruction. The community or urban free schoolers were much more committed to racial or class justice, with their vehicle being the free school. They thought that if enough Black and brown poor children had access to good teachers in free schools, then they could make a difference in the circumstances of those children and families.

Dennison and The First Street School were a little bit in the middle of these two paths. While Dennison was a proponent of getting the relationship right between students and teacher, as well as among the students themselves, his model did not fundamentally upset the traditional model of schooling. In some ways more in line with other urban, “community-control” schools, The First Street School was intent on providing a free education to poor Black and brown students in their New York City neighborhood. Changing the educational experiences of students who had known

failure and despair in the public schools by providing more individualized lessons with caring teachers was more of a primary goal than providing complete freedom to self-direct their own learning. In this case, the happiness of the students was also primary, but it came from being in relationship with teachers who believed you could learn and in an environment that was humane and without pretense.

It is no wonder that those in these different camps often disagreed on issues like where to open their schools, how to fund their schools, and what should be “taught” there. These differences were not superficial—they were fundamental—and got to the core of why these groups did not cohere into an effective, unified movement.

Over time, some of the leaders of the movement, such as Ivan Illich and Paul Goodman, began to promote an idea called “deschooling,” which left schools out of the equation altogether. Here is how Peter Marin, one of the most prolific contributors to the philosophical discussions of the free schools movement, summed up some of the divisions within the movement that he experienced at a conference in New Orleans in 1972:

What emerged for me was a sense of the distances between various free school groups—in terms of how they define schools, childhood, and aspects of American reality. We seem unable to discuss learning or survival unless we do it in terms of *schools*—and that indeed diminishes what we can say, imagine, and do. On the edge of thought we have the notion of “deschooling,” which is not so much a mode of activity as a thrust of reasoning and imagination. Those who accept the idea are at significant odds with those who see free schools as the only feasible alternative to state schooling. But even among the free school partisans there are divisions. Some...seem committed to a Summerhillian, counterculture approach. Others, like Kozol...see the Summerhillian model as escapist and pay less attention to emotional and sexual changes than to questions of political potency and efficacy. For them, the struggle of the blacks and the poor is the central, usually the *only*, one...Though it might seem that those two approaches should coexist and feed each other, they are more often than not set against each other. This raises the question of whether, in fact, there really is a single free school “movement.” What might be closer to the truth is

that some persons are interested in alternative world views and life-styles, and others are interested in political change. Both groups, at the moment, are experimenting with “free” schools as a way of achieving change—but the allegiances on both sides are not really to new kinds of schooling but to *kinds of change*.⁸⁷

This for me highlights the depths of the divisions among the various free school camps. First, Marin is saying that not only do the free schoolers have different ideas about schools and childhood, but “aspects of American reality!” It is not clear *which* aspects he is referring to, nonetheless this is a serious claim. Marin was really pushing for a broader discussion of a vision for the future outside of schooling, but was frustrated not only by the disinterest in doing so within the free schools movement, but also by the inability to make the leap from talking about schooling to considering qualities of life. He seems to be saying that his fellows were caught up in in a multitude of different ways of defining themselves against existing structures, without being willing to open up to a discussion of what kinds of change they would like to see on an individual level, as well as a societal level.

Ultimately, the free schools movement was more divided than they were unified. This was because what they had in common was a negative definition—they defined themselves against traditional schools. As we have seen, they defined themselves positively in myriad, divergent ways—they had many different ideas about how to move forward and even what to move forward towards. Marin writes:

What we are all coming to see is that breaking free from the state’s system is not, in itself, a real liberation: it is merely a first step into responsibility, a new kind of confrontation with the culture and oneself...by leaving existing institutions we have escaped nothing. We have instead come face to face with history. Cut free, adrift, limited by our own fears and internalized repression, hampered by old pedagogies and distracted by “technique,” hounded

⁸⁷ Marin, “The Free School Nonmovement,” 40.

sporadically by the authorities and law, each of us must decide now how we stand in relation to things: how we see ourselves, our comrades, the future.⁸⁸

I interpret Marin to mean that the free schools were primarily based in resisting schooling and mainstream culture, but that in order to move forward and grow, the movement needed to start doing the difficult work of determining “how we see ourselves, our comrades, the future.” I sense Marin pushing the movement to be more self-reflective, to stand for something, not merely against something. Getting away from mere discussions of schooling, Marin is urging those within the movement to push more deliberately to talk about a shared vision for the future.

The competing visions for the future within the free schools movement prevented them from effective movement building. While these differences could have been overcome—as Marin urges—the free schoolers ultimately failed to put their differences aside. These ideological divisions exacerbated the practical problems facing free school startups.

PRACTICAL OBSTACLES

Almost all of the free schools encountered similar practical problems: a lack of secure access to short or long-term funding sources; difficulties in finding a building that they could securely settle into; and the interpersonal problems that arose after the initial excitement of starting a school wore off and the anxieties of different groups of parents or staff began to take hold of them and cause disagreements. Any one of these three issues could prove a school unsustainable. This section of a report published on

⁸⁸ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 49 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 7.

November 1, 1969 in Issue #24 of the newsletter highlights both money issues and building issues typical to starting and growing a free school:

The history of the Portland Free School parallels that of many free schools which started at the beginning of the New School's Explosion, in 1967.

PORTLAND FREE SCHOOL, 3434 SW Corbett Ave., PORTLAND, OREGON

The Free School began late in 1967, with 10 children and 2 adults. There were no paid teachers. During the school year it grew to 20 students and the teachers were assisted by volunteers. No tuition was charged, and the school paid its few bills with donated money, and used donated supplies, in donated quarters. By the end of the year, it was apparent that the Free School could not continue without more extensive community involvement and support. We opened without a building and for several weeks we "floated", meeting in parks and dispersing to various places in, and out of, the city. Later we moved into our first building, with about 60 students and 12 teachers. We soon moved out again when the building was found not to satisfy city codes. We floated for another few weeks, and in October the students of Reed College voted to give us the use of their Student Union, free for the rest of the school year. The S.U. will not be available this year, so we are again without quarters. We hope to buy land and begin to construct our own building in the near future.⁸⁹

Without a large donor or infusion of cash to the Portland Free School, it is difficult to imagine that they succeeded in buying land and building a school for themselves.

Almost every single free school start-up encountered the barrier of not having enough money, and this led to problems paying staff, buying supplies or renting a building.

Although accused of being started primarily by upper- and middle-class people with lots of resources, almost without exception, the free schoolers were short on cash.

Here is one example of a school that could not overcome their financial issues, and wrote about their experiences for the newsletter audience so that others might learn from their mistakes:

Rivendell—the experimental school in Los Altos, California, I've been teaching in this year—was forced to fold last week because of lack of funds...In mid-

⁸⁹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 24 (Santa Barbara: 1 November, 1969), 1.

December it became obvious that the most serious problems were financial—we started operating on a deficit budget, and it was only a matter of time until what little surplus we had would be used up...we were forced to admit that it was financially impossible to continue. That was a hard decision—hard to acknowledge that something that was so good for the children was being stopped because their parents couldn't handle the structural problems...We've learned a lot for next time: that a school needs a solid financial and structural basis to allow the freedom within to grow.⁹⁰

This description points out the effect that the financial issues had on the rest of the school—when parents could not figure out how to sustain a school financially or structurally—the teachers and the students lost out on the educational opportunities that they had been enjoying. It also gives a glimpse into the learning process that attempting to start and grow a free school produced.

Many free schools started up with volunteer labor, as well as donated space or materials. However, there are insurmountable problems with this type of endeavor over the long haul for most groups. In general, teachers and staff were not able to work for free indefinitely. Those who were able to continue volunteering needed either a working spouse or some other type of support. This often ruled out poor and working-class parents and community members who wanted to teach at the free schools, particularly in urban areas. A living wage, especially for retaining skilled teachers, became essential at some point. Schools that could not find a sustainable way to pay their staff most often closed their doors fairly quickly. The Palo Colorado Community School was unfortunate victim:

Dear N.S.E.,
Palo Colorado Community School is defunct—no money, ergo no teacher, no building and no students. It was fine while it lasted. Please take us off your

⁹⁰ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 35 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 3.

subscription list endnote that we are no longer active so that people will no longer correspond with us. Thanks.⁹¹

Another barrier to success that all of the schools faced—regardless of their philosophy or location—was dealing with all of the practicalities of starting and running a school: finding a building to operate out of or a gathering place, dealing with parents, cultivating leadership, division of labor, figuring out their educational philosophy and practices, filing the legal paperwork to become a non-profit, recruiting and retaining students, resolving conflicts, government regulations and zoning issues, filing taxes, and the list goes on. Many of the free schoolers were not prepared to address all of these issues successfully, and most ultimately failed in at least one of these aspects of starting a school. My experience as a school founder, parent, and board member is that figuring out a sustainable method of funding a school, as well as having a stable location for it, both are critical elements that allow a school to build and grow. None of the philosophical ideas really matter if your school cannot bring in money, manage the money it does bring in well, or have a suitable building to bring prospective families to see and students to attend. However, there are dozens of other practical aspects as well, and a lack in any one of these areas can spell disaster for a start-up school.

A third issue that tended to arise at some point fairly early on in the life of the free schools was the issue of parental anxiety. One parent at the Redwood Association Free School in Sonoma County, California, Robert Greenway, wrote a letter in regards to this issue that the NSE reprinted as a “position paper,” and I think it does a great job of articulating this often insurmountable issue.

⁹¹ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 35 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 4.

Free and experimental schools frequently run into a common problem—the anxiety of the parents...It seems to me that this anxiety that gets aroused about “What’s happening to our kids” is understandable and inevitable...a truly cooperative venture arouses every possible hope about involvement in the growth of our children—and probably every latent frustration about what we think didn’t happen to us as well...unless we find a way of dealing with the real anxieties and concerns that this type of enterprise arouses, then we’ll fail before we’ve hardly started. (I’m responding to my own growing sense of frustration and anxiety, and to the sign of sudden and/or premature withdrawals from the school, and to the growing hue and cry for “more organization”).⁹²

This position paper goes on at length and addresses a wide array of concerns that schools often had difficulty dealing with in regards to parental anxieties. But the one that is highlighted right at the end (“the growing hue and cry for ‘more organization’”) I think is fundamental. Parental anxieties arise with regard to what their children are—or are not—doing in the free school, whether or not they are “learning” anything eventually comes up for discussion. “Who is going to decide things?”—i.e. the students, parents, teachers, or some combination—is also often a hurdle that parents and schools stumble upon.⁹³ Teaching philosophy of the school, the school’s relationship to society, the organization or management of the school, and parental influence on the school are all mentioned as potential issues to be worked out. In my experience, I have witnessed differences of opinion on any number of these issues become divisive and destructive to a school if not dealt with in a mature and democratic fashion. As Greenway pointed out, these issues often cause families to leave the school, or at the very least, push for more coercion and control than the teachers may want to enact.

⁹² *New Schools Exchange*, no. 26 (Santa Barbara: 19 November, 1969), 1.

⁹³ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 26 (Santa Barbara: 19 November, 1969), 3.

It is clear that fundamental issues with money and the cascading effects of that financial lack often spelled disaster for young free schools. These issues were further compounded by parental anxiety over what was going on with their children at the schools. Few free schools tackled all of these practical obstacles successfully.

CHAPTER FOUR: LEGACIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Old 1960s free schools like ours...aren't anachronisms, and we aren't messiahs of some glorified new age, either. But we do bear an important message, one based on decades of hard-earned experience—and one that many still find hard to embrace: Children learn best when they do so for their own reasons, when they are respected as intelligent, responsible beings, and when they are free to move about and question within living, loving, exciting environments that are not sealed off from the outside world.⁹⁴

Although the vast majority of the free schools that started in the 1960s are no longer in operation, a few survived. Additionally, new organizations and networks have started and grown since the end of the free schools era, which connect hundreds of democratic schools and other self-directed schools around the world. These legacies, as well as the historical record of educational ideas produced during the free schools era and more contemporary literature that draws on those ideas, remain relevant today and merit further study.

TWO SCHOOLS THAT SURVIVED: ALBANY FREE SCHOOL AND SUDBURY VALLEY SCHOOL

These were interesting times, when the birth of hope and the death of hope seemed on a collision course. And there we were, along with an uncounted number of other, independent, experimental schools of all shapes, sizes, and micro-philosophies, determined to create genuine alternatives to the rigid,

⁹⁴ Chris Mercogliano. *Making It up as We Go Along: The Story of the Albany Free School*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998) 135.

compulsion-based model of education that had been corralling the minds of American children for the past century.⁹⁵

While it is true that most of the free schools did not last—and many of them closed within a year or two of opening their doors—two of the free schools that survived are worth highlighting as they have inspired many others over the last fifty years. Both schools were inspired by Summerhill, both opened their doors in 1968–1969, and both are still in operation today in 2021. While more in-depth studies are needed to assess why these two schools and others like them stood the test of time (a thorough exploration of the specific philosophies and practices of these schools is beyond the scope of this project), I’d like to offer just a taste of why I think that these two schools in particular are successful while so many others were not.

In 1969, The Albany Free School (AFS) was started by Mary Leue at the behest of her ten year-old son, Mark, who no longer wished to attend public school. Here’s how Leue told the story to her hometown newspaper at age 97,

Leue had learned from a Schenectady minister about Summerhill, the alternative boarding school in England set up less than two years after she was born. After reading about the original “free school” and corresponding with its founder, A.S. Neill, “I decided I wanted to start a school like Summerhill in downtown Albany. ... It just seemed like the right way to teach kids.”

(Neill responded to Leue’s idea of establishing an inner-city free school in this country, “I would think myself daft to try!”)⁹⁶

Before long, Mark was joined by a few other neighborhood kids and AFS was born.

Founded in an urban neighborhood in Albany, NY, AFS had a mix of poor, working-class, and middle-class elementary students Perhaps because of this, AFS attracted

⁹⁵ Mercogliano, *Making It up as We Go Along*, 1.

⁹⁶ Richie Davis. "Dreams of a 'Real Community'." *Greenfield Recorder*. June 30, 2017. Accessed May 17, 2021. <https://www.recorder.com/Dreams-of-a-real-community-11023929>.

volunteer staff among college students, former teachers, and parents from the start. Not without its own startup hiccups, here's why I think AFS made it while so many others did not.

First, AFS rejected relying entirely on tuition for its upkeep. From the start, the school accepted whatever tuition the local families could afford, but relied heavily on entrepreneurial enterprises to keep all the bills paid. Having spent some of her small inheritance money from her mother's death on purchasing the nineteenth-century school building "for a song" from an Italian veterans group, Mary Leue spent the last of it on purchasing several abandoned houses across the street from the school.⁹⁷ In this racially and economically diverse neighborhood, the entire school community worked to rehabilitate the houses and later rented them out as a source of income for the school. They also served as an anchor for the growing community, and several teachers and families moved in as well. All together, they purchased at least ten of the row houses, and soon had a thriving community in addition to a school. Jonathan Kozol is credited as an inspiration for the idea, having suggested that schools should endeavor to create businesses to sustain themselves, so that they would not become reliant on grant, government or tuition money and could admit low-income students and not just middle-class students who could afford tuition.⁹⁸

Having started two ultimately unprofitable businesses (a college-textbook distributorship and a corner store), the AFS community later established a number of profitable businesses "to both broaden the school's mission and support the health

⁹⁷ Mercogliano, *Making It Up as We Go Along*, 7.

⁹⁸ Mercogliano, *Making It Up as We Go Along*, 8.

and growth of community members.”⁹⁹ The Family Life Center offered support to new families and parents. Leue also started a press, and published books as well as two subscription-based journals: *SKOLE: The Journal of Alternative Education* and the *Journal of Family Life*.¹⁰⁰ The quarterly newsletter SKOLE was a true spiritual successor of NSE, but it went much deeper, offering thought-provoking essays and articles by many dozens of leaders and participants in the “new” free schools movement of the 1980s and 1990s. One brilliant move that Mary Leue made was to bind several dozen copies of SKOLE into four volumes, which she also published and sold.¹⁰¹ This made them much easier to access, as the bound versions are much easier to read than the copies of the NSE that I received from Yale, which were often printed poorly on colored paper! Alas, they are now difficult to purchase, having been out of print for quite awhile. However, I was able to obtain all four volumes, and I am grateful that this piece of history was not lost thanks to Mary’s thoughtful work!

In addition to the long-term thinking of creating profitable enterprises that not only helped pay the bills, but also served community-building functions for the school, the community itself was likely the other contributing factor to the longevity of the school. Many in the school community not only worked together, but lived together, sharing childcare, meals, celebrations, and tending each others’ backyard gardens. With such close working and living conditions, the adults also began meeting weekly

⁹⁹ Ellen Becker, Larry Becker, Tom McPheeters, and Chris Mercogliano. "Mary Leue: A Tribute." *Paths of Learning* 1, no. 1 (1999): 6-7.

¹⁰⁰ Richie Davis, "Dreams of a 'Real Community'," *Greenfield Recorder*.

¹⁰¹ Mary Macomber Leue. *Challenging the Giant. the Best of SKOLE, the Journal of Alternative Education*. Vol. 1-4. 4 vols. (Down-To-Earth Books, 2008).

together early on in a sort of therapeutic group to discuss the variety of issues that arose. As Chris Mercogliano remembers:

Working closely with the kids inevitably brought teachers face-to-face with their own unresolved childhood issues...All of us felt extremely challenged by the intimate depth and the emotional content of the relationships in the school—children with children, children with adults, adults with adults...Mary suggested that we start a weekly personal-growth group...Part therapy and support group, part conflict-resolution setting, part community meeting, “group,” as we call it, remains an absolute cornerstone of both school and community, and unquestionably is the key to the longevity of both.¹⁰²

Owning their own school building, having external sources of income, living and working together as a community, and addressing conflict and growth in an open and healthy way are some of the key factors that I attribute to the long-term success of the AFS.

Sudbury Valley School opened its doors in 1968 in Framingham, MA, outside of Boston, on a ten-acre estate adjoining eight-hundred acres of state park lands. Like at AFS, the founders of the school dove into rehabilitating the old convent into a habitable school building. Having influenced my life and the lives of my three children to an extraordinary degree, I first visited Sudbury Valley while attending a conference of school founders and staff in the summer of 1996. There, I met many of the schools’ founders, including Daniel Greenberg, Hanna Greenberg, and Mimsy Sadofsky, all of whom have published innumerable articles, essays, and books about the school and its unique style of education (mostly through their own press, like AFS).¹⁰³

Like Summerhill and many of the other free schools, both Sudbury Valley School and Albany Free School held similar types of all-school meetings to deal with issues

¹⁰² Mercagliano, *Making It Up as We Go Along*, 14.

¹⁰³ Carolyn Shepard Fox. "Home." Home | Sudbury Valley School. Accessed May 22, 2021. <https://sudburyvalley.org/>.

like rule-making, rule-breaking, and interpersonal conflicts as well as all of the other issues that arise during the day-to-day life of a school. According to Sudbury Valley School founder Daniel Greenberg, here is a glimpse into life there during the first year:

For a new school, inexperienced and untried, staffed by a group of people who were still struggling to define and understand the basic philosophy and practices they were responsible for, a sudden influx of 130 children of all ages—four through seventeen—was a huge challenge. For example, the basic governance was a participant democracy based on New England town meetings, which include all residents of the community—in this case, all students and staff. School Meetings began in July, and continued every week from then on, so there was no ambiguity about who made the rules. But there was no formal system in existence to deal with people who break the rules. As a result, all allegations of breaking a rule were discussed and dealt with on the School Meeting floor, with the result that there was no effective disciplinary arm of the school. It would be an understatement to say that the situation was chaotic.¹⁰⁴

Later on, SVS adopted a daily judicial meeting to adjudicate conflicts. These forms of participatory democracy were also fundamental structures that kept the schools on track.

SVS was highlighted in issue #30 of the NSE as the “Free School of the Week”:
“For over 2 years the Sudbury Valley School has been held aloft as an exemplary non-coercive, student-regulated school.”¹⁰⁵ I am not sure why it was held up as “exemplary”—and there was not a regular “School of the Week” section of the newsletter—but considering the high attrition rate of the schools, two years seems like it was worthy of note as “longevity” within the movement. The issue also highlighted some of the school rules printed in their latest brochure, such as “9. No food shall be kept in the school overnight except for cooking supplies kept in the kitchen/

¹⁰⁴ Daniel Greenberg. "Sudbury Valley School: An Idea Whose Time Has Come." Sudbury School: An Idea Whose Time Has Come | Sudbury Valley School. Accessed May 18, 2021. <https://sudburyvalley.org/article/sudbury-valley-school-idea-whose-time-has-come>.

¹⁰⁵ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 30 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 4.

laboratory.”¹⁰⁶ The “student-regulated” nature of the school perhaps was one reason the list of school rules was published, maybe as an example of the reasonableness or practicality of the rules that the majority of students had voted to endorse.

SVS charged tuition—though intentionally pegging it as far below the current state public school expenditure per student as they could—in order to make it as affordable as they could for families. They took no government or grant funding. Like AFS, they determined never to be dependent on outside sources for income, and for many years (I am not sure if this is still the case) would not allow any tuition discounts whatsoever. Located about twenty-five miles from the urban center of Boston, Sudbury Valley was not founded with a primary intention of social and racial justice, as AFS could be said to have been. However, because SVS was attentive to growth and remained fluid in many respects, it has continued to be a beacon for many local families, as well as those across the world seeking to start new democratic schools or send their children to existing ones.

Another similarity between the two schools is the conviction of the founders to their respective schools. Mary Leue, Daniel Greenberg, and Mimsy Sadofsky were all extraordinarily determined, resourceful, and thoughtful in founding and growing their schools and communities. Vital to maintaining an intact and functioning school community, it’s important not to overlook the importance of the strong leadership and vision these school founders provided. In my experience, most free schools fall apart either when the money runs out, when they can’t find or keep a permanent building for the school, or when one faction of staff or parents decides to leave, usually over

¹⁰⁶ *New Schools Exchange*, no. 30 (Santa Barbara: [1970?]), 4.

philosophical differences. Somehow, AFS and SVS managed to keep on going, despite these dangers. Although there are some wide philosophical differences between the two schools—and Leue and Greenberg often sparred within the pages of SKOLE—both have managed to inspire new generations of free schoolers around the world.

Sudbury Valley has been supporting new schools for decades, selling a new schools starter kit to anyone who requests it since the 1990s, and maintaining an online discussion group for Sudbury schools for several decades as well. AVS invites anyone who is serious about finding out about the school to come and volunteer. As mentioned, both have also been leaders in the discussions and conferences about free and democratic schools, having published hundreds of books, articles, essays, videos, and more. Lastly, and possibly most importantly, the longevity of AVS and SVS has enabled thousands of students to experience a more democratic education based on freedom, trust, and responsibility. Although Sudbury Valley has written extensively about their graduates in the past, there is no real way to quantify what the legacies of these schools and education models on so many people really are. As for me and my family, the legacies are of incalculable value.

CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONS

Other legacies of the free schools movement can be found in the organizations that help modern democratic schools and homeschoolers find and communicate with one another. Some of these organizations are AERO (Alternative Education Resource

Organization) and The Alliance for Self-Directed Education in the United States.¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸

The International Democratic Education Network has been hosting IDEC, the International Democratic Education Conference, in countries all over the world since 1993.¹⁰⁹ Regional organizations and conferences exist as well: EUDEC (the European Democratic Education Community), ADEC (the Australasian Democratic Education Community), and JDEC (the Japanese Democratic Education Community).¹¹⁰ These networks include thousands of educational projects, schools, teachers, parents, and students from across the globe. It is clear that the legacies of the free schools movement live on in these schools and organizations, and the people who are drawn to participate in them.

What gives me hope today is the fact that free schools still exist, because although the free schools movement has failed to make any real change in our society as a whole, the surviving free schools do offer a refuge for some children who would be worse off in the public schools. In fact, more and more people are opting out of public schooling, including a huge increase in the numbers of homeschoolers. According to the National Home Education Research Institute:

There were an estimated 4.5 to 5.0 million homeschool students in grades K-12 in the United States during March of 2021 (roughly 8% to 9% of school-age children). There were about 2.5 million homeschool students in spring 2019 (or

¹⁰⁷ AERO Webmaster. "Education Revolution – Alternative Education Resource Organization – The Education Revolution." Education Revolution Alternative Education Resource Organization. Accessed June 01, 2021. <http://www.educationrevolution.org/store/>.

¹⁰⁸ "Home Page." Alliance for Self-Directed Education. Accessed May 22, 2021. <https://www.self-directed.org/>.

¹⁰⁹ Super User. "What Is IDEN?" What Is IDEN? Accessed May 17, 2021. <https://www.idenetwork.org/index.php/about/what>.

¹¹⁰ "European Democratic Education Community." EUDEC. Accessed May 17, 2021. <https://eudec.org/>.

3% to 4% of school-age children) [note 1]. The homeschool population had been growing at an estimated 2% to 8% per annum over the past several years, but it grew drastically from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021.¹¹¹

By contrast, the NHERI website states that in 1973 there were only 13,000 homeschool students, and in 1983 there were 93,000.¹¹² It is unclear whether these numbers grew only because of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020-2021, which required remote learning for most students, or if they will continue to grow once students are allowed to go back to in-person classes, but nonetheless this is still a significant development.

CONCLUSIONS

The free schools movement was a weak alliance of those fed up with public schooling. In agreement that there must be a better, more humane way to educate children in the United States, the free schoolers had difficulties in coming together around how to accomplish providing that better education. A movement in name only, they were divided by philosophy, pedagogy, and vision for the future of education and society. The free schoolers started a wide variety of experimental schools and other projects, most of which never got off the ground before closing their doors. Ultimately, almost none of them succeeded at building schools which would last over the long haul.

Lack of money was the primary practical obstacle to achieving the success that the free schoolers dreamed of for their alternative schools. Because this lack led to so

¹¹¹ "Homeschooling: The Research, Scholarly Articles, Studies, Facts, Research." National Home Education Research Institute. Accessed May 10, 2021. <https://www.nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/>.

¹¹² "Homeschooling: The Research, Scholarly Articles, Studies, Facts, Research." National Home Education Research Institute. Accessed May 10, 2021. <https://www.nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/>.

many insurmountable problems—like not being able to pay staff or pay rent for a building—most of the free schoolers were focused more on trying to survive than on helping each other. Without the solidarity of a unified movement, fledgling schools could not join together to overcome practical problems. Granted, they attended conferences, published a newsletter and formed regional associations to try and share some resources, but ultimately their many ideological differences and practical stressors kept them apart.

In addition, the free schoolers were operating without a road map or a guide to help them create the types of schools they were envisioning. A majority of them were young and idealistic, yet many had not completely let go of the traditional culture of academia that they were rebelling against. Yes, they looked to the ideas of the influencers, and the models of Summerhill and The First Street School for ideas, but attempting to start a completely new educational institution within a culture that was dominated by public schooling proved daunting for the tiny start-ups. Almost none of them had any experience working in a free school atmosphere before they attempted to start schools of their own, and that lack of experience also proved deadly.

These are some of the myriad reasons why the free schools movement ultimately failed to make a significant impact on education in the United States. Other significant, external factors should be studied further, as I suspect that the rise of a conservative backlash against the counterculture, and the later ascendance of neoliberalism, with a turn towards “back to basics” and standardization in education ultimately crushed the wider movement for educational alternatives that was underway during the 1960s and 1970s.

Although most of the free schools did not survive, some did. Many others have started in the decades since, and some—like the Albany Free School and Sudbury Valley School—have been very successful in their own ways. Newer books have been written, and the conversations about more humane, freer schooling continues today. Conferences of free schoolers (although now most often referred to as democratic schoolers or self-directed learners) continue to convene. Summerhill is one hundred years old—no longer an experiment, but highly successful. There have been some victories for the free schools movement.

I believe that there is still much to be learned from the free schools movement. Many of the discussions about education reform and child rearing that were raised by the free schoolers are still relevant today, if not more so. In our neoliberal era of standardization and high-stakes testing, the free schoolers' critiques have not ceased to be applicable. Furthermore, this topic is simply understudied. Whether misguided or not, the free schoolers seriously considered the relationship between education and social justice. Without a robust volume of historical inquiry, many lessons may be lost. More than simply examining the surviving free schools as positive models of education, the historical corpus of texts and ideas left behind from the free schools era can and should stimulate our conversations in the midst of today's educational crisis.

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