

Daniel Greenberg and Mimsy Sadofsky (Editors).

LEGACY OF TRUST:

Life after the Sudbury Valley School experience.

Framingham, MA: Sudbury Valley School Press, 1992.

In the fall of 1971, I was living in San Francisco, a recent transplant from New York City who had joined the exodus to the Haight-Ashbury scene, albeit a couple of years after its peak. Although I had no academic preparation in the fields of education or social work, having earned a bachelor's degree with a major in history and a minor in sociology, I secured employment as a nursery school teacher and youth group worker at a local community center. While at the center, I befriended a couple who worked part-time there and who were also involved in a local private secondary school. Meeting in a small building that once housed a church, it was called Pathways Alternative School. My recollections have faded significantly over the last two decades, but I do remember that the school enrolled fifty or so 13-to-18 year-olds and was very informally organized, with classes meeting somewhat sporadically and students having significant input over what courses would be offered and when (and if) they would attend classes. The students were mostly from middle-class backgrounds and, either with or without parental approval, enrolled in the school because they found the traditional high school structure to be intolerably rigid and stifling. I believe the school lasted for about a half-dozen years.

My own involvement in the school was short-lived, as I moved away from San Francisco a year later. During the early fall of 1971, however, I was asked by my friends if I would like to teach a social studies class at the school on a volunteer basis. I had done some tutoring while in high school and college and had put off entering a doctoral program in history to "find out what I wanted to do with my life" (or something to that effect). I was intrigued with the idea of teaching a class to high school students whom I was sure I would find particularly challenging. I remember vividly the first time I walked over to the school, which I think was on Pine Street. After meeting informally with the few staff members of the school (including my two friends), I sat down with a small group of interested students. In consideration of the nature of the school, I started our conversation by asking them what kind of course they would like me to teach. With visions of them answering my query with responses like "Native American Folklore", "The Impact of Television on American Culture", and "The History of Rock and Roll", I was astounded to hear that they sought a "general class in American History", something that up until then these students had apparently not been offered. So, for a couple of hours every week, during the next eight months or so, we sat on the floor or on beanbags and talked about American history.

Reflecting back on this experience, I realize that while I very much enjoyed it, I was not a particularly good teacher. In fact, for some of these students, I was probably pretty lousy. Although my interpretation of American history was appropriately "Sixties radical", my pedagogy and organization of the course was too traditional. I did too much talking and failed to develop teaching strategies that would truly touch students' imaginations and interests. I started with the colonial period and tried to get through ("cover") as much of the chronology as possible. My recollection is that a steady enrollment of about five or six students at the beginning of the course, with another student or two occasionally sitting in, dissipated to just a couple of them still attending by the following spring. Perhaps it was the nicer weather that distracted the students away from my class. Perhaps it was other, more "exciting" classes offered during the second semester that turned their attention away from our examination of American History. (Maybe "Guerilla Theatre" or "Contemporary Folk Music" or "Vegetarian Cooking" were being offered?! - I really cannot remember.) Much more likely, it was the way that I taught the class that had, in the parlance of the times, "turned off" most of the students.

These and other memories of my limited foray into alternative schooling came to mind when I read *Legacy of Trust: Life after the Sudbury Valley School experience*. I have always wondered about the futures of those students who attended the decidedly untraditional Pathways Alternative School (not so unlike my curiosity about the students whom I taught, with somewhat more success, at a public high school several years later). Had their alternative educational experience during the high school years made a significant difference in their lives, for example, in their beliefs about politics, ethics, material success, and so forth? Had it changed the ways they interacted with others? Had it changed the ways they viewed themselves? Had it enhanced or endangered their possibilities for a college education and/or an occupation? Few alternative schools about which I am aware have ever attempted to comprehensively answer these significant questions about the "legacy" of what they offer for their students, perhaps in large part because so few have lasted long enough to engage in such an assessment. It would be against the progressive tradition in education, perhaps, to become bogged down with trying to predict outcomes or to clearly distinguish "ends" from "means". But for public relations purposes alone, if not for educational ones, it is probably valuable for alternative schools to try to determine more clearly what their students gain from the unconventional experiences that are provided.

I must confess that I never heard of the Sudbury Valley School before reading this account of a survey conducted by staff members to answer

questions similar to those mentioned above. The school, located on nine wooded acres twenty miles from Boston, was founded in 1968 "as a place where each student could be trusted fully to make every decision about how to grow from a child into an adult, seeking such advice as he or she wished" (p. 5.). Beginning with 60 students, more than two decades later it has 125 students ranging in age from four to over twenty, indeed "125 individual ways of thinking about everything" (p. 6). However, except for the recollections of former students, this book reveals precious little about this alternative school which, miraculously, has been able to sustain itself during the tumult (educational, financial, and otherwise) of the last quarter-century. My disappointment about this lack of detail is not meant as a criticism since it is clear that the authors never intended to provide such information. (An appendix at the end of the book lists several other written materials, audiotapes, and videotapes that detail the school's philosophy and practices. However, none of them are among the holdings of the university library where I work, and I suspect that, unless I place an order, this book will not be either.) Instead, the book is solely dedicated to detailing the results of a study of 188 former students. The explicit intent of the study was "to assuage some of the anxieties of educators, observers, and prospective parents, about expected outcomes for children who enroll in Sudbury Valley School; and also to see if we could uncover for ourselves some evidence for the types of outcomes we had anticipated when we first set up a school based on our peculiar combination of principles" (p. 10).

The authors realize the enormous difficulty of attempting to isolate the specific influences of a child's life. Has schooling affected a child in a particular way, or have significant roles instead (or also) been played by genetic, economic class, parental, familial, and community factors? The authors also recognize some of the methodological problems of their study, for example, that different people, with no real common training, interviewed different former students. Still, what this study does provide is a representative image of what has become of almost 200 of the school's former students, as well as the thoughts of some of these adults about the impact of the school on their lives.

Besides my chagrin at so little discussion of the school itself (e.g., about its history, curriculum, and organization; staff members and students; daily life; and the "peculiar combination of principles" mentioned above), I was also disappointed that the designers of the study "carefully avoided questions that dealt with the opinions, character traits or beliefs of the respondents" (p. 11). Such aspects were avoided by the interviewers, although sometimes respondents volunteered such information anyway, because of the vivid concern that responses would be unreliable given that the

study was being sponsored and carried out by the school itself (rather than by a researcher not affiliated with the school). Still, the most interesting parts of the book for me are when such topics are addressed by respondents. Additionally, there is very little analysis of the results of the study. I would have liked to have known more about staff members' own assessments of the findings dealing with former students' future education and occupations as well as of the respondents' comments. Then again, perhaps this is in keeping with the practice of the school of letting students (or here the reader) by and large figure out for themselves what they want to and will get out of their school (reading) experience.

There are, then, serious inherent shortcomings of this book. Nevertheless, I still found it to be an important one for me to read. For one thing, while it by no means addresses all the questions that I might have about alternative schooling, or even about this particular school, it does provide some interesting data. For example, it is evident that the school "produced" (in the very loose sense of that word) a perhaps surprising diversity of former students - from those who lived "hippie style" without a flush toilet (p. 90), disdained the use of all credit cards (p. 94), self-identified as a "Dead-head" (p. 128), or lived in a tipi (p. 132) - to those who joined the Air Force (p. 147), or became a professor of mathematics (p. 112), a supermarket department manager (p. 70), a fireman (p. 112), a lawyer (p. 164), or a machinist (p. 164). With regard to occupational and educational futures, then, there is clearly no one path that former students (long-term and short-term ones alike) followed.

In other ways, strong threads do weave together these otherwise distinct lives, no doubt at least in part due to their common Sudbury Valley School experience. Most noteworthy among the findings of the questionnaires and interviews are former students' feelings of self-confidence and self-empowerment; their desire to truly enjoy whatever they are doing (e.g., in their work, by traveling, and through involvement in the arts); and their ability to persevere, problem solve, and carefully reflect on tasks in which they choose to engage. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they seem to have a strikingly high level of satisfaction with their lives. The *angst* of the late twentieth century middle class is scarcely evident among this population, although it is true that virtually all of these former students are relatively young (that is, from 20-35 years of age).

The nature of this alternative school is to "trust" almost completely in the judgements of its students. Most educators would find it disconcerting to do this, that is, to have students choose, with relatively minimal adult guidance, what and when they will learn. It appears, in fact, that some

former students spent most of their time at school socializing, although staff members would no doubt argue that the learning that took place during these times was probably more beneficial than the kind of cramming and molding that would otherwise have taken place with recalcitrant students. (One respondent compares public schools to prisons and argues that children are encouraged to become “mentally sluggish and submissive” (p. 137), a conclusion with which, generally speaking, I am in agreement.) And yet it certainly appears from this study that the result of such a high level of “trust”, at least in the case of this school, is generally well-adapted adults who have a good sense of their own selves and capabilities, and the ability and confidence to pursue what interests them. As one former student comments: “I am very content. Sudbury Valley allowed me to bond with people and to learn to trust people. No one shot down anyone’s dreams at Sudbury Valley. I am capable of dealing with defeat and I have no fear because of Sudbury Valley” (p 129).

There are many questions that arise but go unanswered about the nature of this alternative school and the views of its former students. For example, does the desire of so many of them to have “happiness” (p. 90), “fun” (p. 94), and “freedom” (p. 137) produce a kind of narcissistic betrayal of another radical goal of more communal (and more consciously “political”) relationships with others? One student, for instance, refers to the school as “keep(ing) me from wasting my time doing silly things of protest” (p. 91) and another suggests that “it doesn’t make sense to be guilty about anything” (p. 93). In addition, is it really the case that education must always be “fun” for young people to learn (p. 94)? And how much do the unique backgrounds of the students, given their voluntary enrollment in the school (and the financial means to do so), play a role in their future occupations, formal education, self-confidence, and so forth? While *Legacy of Trust* does not set out to ask such questions, let alone answer them, in the course of detailing the results of the school’s study it does raise important issues about teaching and learning. In particular, it helps to remind us to make problematic our assumptions about children, pedagogy, curriculum, and school organization. And, although limited in scope, it alerts educators, parents, and others to the fact that alternative schooling based on such principles as freedom, empowerment, individuality, creativity, and problem-solving is alive and apparently well in Framingham, Massachusetts. That in itself is worth trumpeting through the halls of academia, the pages of scholarship, and the meeting rooms of school districts.

Kenneth Teitelbaum

State University of New York at Binghamton