



ISC Views and Voices

“Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” - John Dewey

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Is There Anything More Beautiful?

by Nicolette Groeneveld



The above is the scene I walked in on one afternoon, and it set my heart aglow! Kris was teaching Chelsy to read and



It is very understandable that parents of young children are concerned about the older students and how they will treat the young ones. But I have long stopped even thinking about it! What I witness on a daily basis is the older students being gentle with the young ones, helping them, caring for them when they're hurt or sad, playing with them and teaching them. Take, for example, the group of teens who sat with the younger kids and played *All About Me*, a game where players share personal things about themselves and their lives. Or the lessons in cheerleading that Kassie and Chelsy got from Katie. Or Amanda playing Barbies with Kassie.



spell “big” words, and Katie and Logan were teaching Kacey to write. “Who needs staff as teachers?” I thought, “The

older students do such a great job!”

Since the very beginning, I have found the age-mixing at our school to be one of the most beautiful aspects of our philosophy. Watching the precious interactions between the younger and older students is a reason all in itself to come to school every day! Whether in helping younger students or in sorting out conflicts with them, our older students are truly fantastic!

A month ago, a family of younger children joined our school. The father, when he came for his first “live” tour (as in during the day with all the students present), caught his breath at the sight of our older students. “How will they treat our kids?” he worried.

His daughters took him on a tour of the school, and when they got to the gym, one of our older boys greeted the girls and shared a few words with them. Later, as the girls were walking through the hallway back to the main part of the school, they were warmly greeted by a few older girls walking toward them. The father was very impressed, and his concerns about the older students were cleared.

In times of conflict, the older students also modify their reactions, knowing they're dealing with an age group different than their own. I recently sat in on a mediation between a group of younger and older students. I really didn't need to say anything; instead I had the privilege of witnessing an amazingly honest interchange that, on the part of the older students, clearly demonstrated their tremendous patience and consideration for the age difference they were dealing with, and, on the part of the younger students, showed a courage to stand up for themselves to the older kids that left me very impressed!

The courage students gain at ISC to stand up for themselves is also reflected in students writing up younger and older kids to the JC; age becomes irrelevant, while an insistence on being treated with respect becomes key.

So, while traditional schools separate age groups and create disunity, bullying and fear, I celebrate the age mixing in our school that creates self-respect, respect for others and peace!

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Excellence in Education?

by Nicolette Groeneveld

This article was published in the February 26th issue of Vue Weekly.

I recently drove past a high school that has a sign out front saying, "Here, we all strive for excellence." 'Really?!' I thought and wondered what that school's definition of excellence is and how they measure that everyone in the school is striving for it.

In the ten years I taught in public education, I became very disillusioned with what was considered excellence. From what I observed, the excellent student was the one who sat down, stayed quiet, listened carefully, questioned nothing, completed all assignments (no matter how futile), studied hard, did well on tests and got an A+ report card. In other words, the excellent student was the automaton who was skilled at production and memorization.

Maybe in the industrial age where children grew up to be assembly line workers, that definition of excellence fit, but in today's post-industrial age where innovation and self-initiative are keys to success, followers, pleasers and performers are no longer what employers are looking for; they are, in fact the cause of many complaints. "The graduates I hire can't *think*," an employer recently told me. "They constantly need to be told what to do, and they can't seem to solve problems on their own." Communication skills are often lacking as well, despite that they are often the most important aspect of a person's job. A parts sales person recently said to me, "Anyone can look up parts numbers and key the information into the computer. But it's the person who's got the people skills – the one who can make a grumpy customer happy – who wins the client's repeat business and impresses the employer."

Looking a step further, who are today's employers? Many of them are the "class clowns", the "hooligans", the ones who refused to conform and do as they were told. They're the "average" kids and the "failures" who left school and jumped right into the real world. They're the ones who, in many cases, are now bosses to the "excellent" students who went on to get a "higher education"

because they were told that's what they'd need to become successful.

Well, one thing I can say for sure is that my higher education served only to get me the piece of paper I needed to become a teacher. Apart from my practicum, the four years I spent getting my B.Ed. did nothing but reinforce my memorization skills and hold me stuck in my performance-oriented drive for high marks. But the dean's honor list standing I graduated with didn't make me a good teacher; in fact, I was a total flop my first year! My success as a teacher came only through being immersed in the reality of the Junior High classroom and having to deal – moment by moment – with the demands of my job.

Reality is the best teacher, yet excellence in schools seems based on a completely unreal world. Reality check #1: In real life workplaces, employees deal with people of all ages. In schools, children are segregated into same-age groupings. How are they to learn to effectively deal with and have respect for people older and younger than themselves? #2: In today's world, knowing how to source and sift through information is a key skill. In schools, children are generally presented facts and required to memorize and regurgitate them. Research projects are rare, and self-directed learning is practically unheard of. #3: In real life, people need problem solving skills, especially in dealing with other people. In schools, conflicting students are most often separated by adults and punished for inappropriate behavior rather than being involved in creating a truly functional solution. #4: Many employees take extra training involving exams, but more important than getting high marks on exams is employees' ability to put into practice what they've learned. In schools, students "learn" information and then write an exam on it, but *very* rarely does the information come to practical, daily use (how often, for example, do people analyze sentence structure while reading a book or use algebra in their daily life?) #5: As adults, we pursue what we're interested in and learn, grow and experience fulfillment as a result of our pursuits. In schools, children are expected to learn and grow by studying subjects that are

forced on them and that they're not necessarily interested in, and they're reprimanded or labeled if they're unmotivated or disinterested. #6: Society celebrates all the different talents people have. If an adult is very skilled in a certain area, his/her employer likely makes the most of that skill. If an adult is unskilled in a certain area, it is very unlikely that s/he is made to work overtime to become proficient at it, unless it is truly an essential part of that person's job. In schools, children are expected to be good at everything – at least that's the message children get when the students with honors in every subject are loudly praised. Students who are weak in certain areas are forced to do extra work or get extra help, which takes away from the time they can spend enjoying their areas of strength and often negatively impacts their self-esteem.

There are many other areas where reality and the school system don't match. So when I drive by a school that claims everyone in their building strives for excellence, how am I to imagine what that means, let alone be impressed by it? All I can do is shake my head and be thankful for the alternative schools out there that *do* reflect reality and make it possible for children to attain a form of excellence that *will* serve them in the *real* world.



"Ask the experienced rather than the learned."
-- Arabic proverb

To rescue or to help?

Nicolette's working on the newsletter. Student A appears at the office door wearing only athletic shorts: "Nicolette, B and C won't give me back my pants!"

Nicolette: "So, what are you going to do about that?"

A: "I don't know..."

Nicolette: "Have you told B and C very clearly that you want your pants back?"

A: "Yes, but they still won't give them to me."

Nicolette: "So what else can you do to get them back?"

A: "Get an adult to come with me and tell them to give my shorts back?"

Nicolette: "I don't have the authority to do that, but if you want my help, you can call mediation."

A: "I'll just go try asking again..."

In the distance Nicolette hears: "I want my pants back or I'm calling mediation!"

Moments later, A walks past the office with a proud smile on his face. "I got them!" he says.

Problem solved, no "rescuing" involved!

Mask Making

by Nicolette Groeneveld



did prep work, which meant cutting plaster-coated wrap into strips. Then came the actual mask-making.

We began by pulling all our hair back and covering our faces with Vaseline. Then our chosen partner dipped the plaster-coated wrap into water and began covering our faces. Straws appeared when it was time for our noses to be formed and from there it was just a matter of making sure the plaster coating was thick enough. Once it was, we were left to dry for a few minutes and then our mask was peeled off our faces. We then cut any loose edges off our masks and set the masks aside to dry.

At the second mask-making session, all we had to do was cover our masks in a gooey plaster to give it a smooth finish.

Our next step is to sand our masks, and thereafter, we will do the last class which will be the decoration of our masks. Rumor has it Bretton will decorate his mask to reflect one of KISS's face designs. The other masks, I imagine, will develop personalities as we go. Once complete, we may bring our masks to the drama class that has now started... but that will be another story!

As Lael and I quickly discovered, it wasn't very glamorous! But it was fun, and it was a very neat experience! It was also a first step into the world of drama.

Before leaving for Denmark, Amanda asked me if we could get acting classes started. "Of course!" I said. "I know a great drama teacher! I'll see if she'd be interested in coming to teach a class here!"

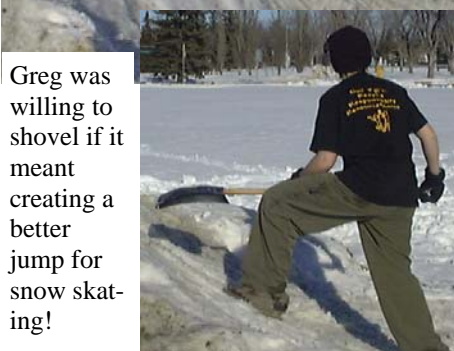
I contacted my friend, but because of her schedule, she couldn't commit to regular classes. She offered to do a three-part mask workshop instead.

I got back to Amanda who, at my request, had created a list of all the other students interested in drama. We gathered all the students together and I told them that I hadn't found a drama teacher yet, but that we could side-step and do a mask-making workshop. The students liked the idea, and I thought it would be fun too!

So, what did mask-making involve? First we had to decide on a design for our masks—ie. get a general idea of what we wanted our mask to look like. Then we



Guess who!



Greg was willing to shovel if it meant creating a better jump for snow skating!

A Neat Thought

I have the pleasure of driving Kris Iselin to school every day, and recently he came up with a really neat idea. It began when he asked me if I thought the government would ever transform all regular schools into Sudbury schools. At the thought of that happening, Kris said, "Wouldn't that be neat if everyone went to Sudbury schools and only a few kids went to regular school. Then we'd all be saying, 'What?! You go to regular school? Whoa, what's that like?'"

I'll be looking forward to that day!

Update from Denmark

Amanda and Rebecca left for Denmark at the end of February; since their departure, we have received two e-mails from each girl. Both are doing very well, notably Amanda who is surviving not being allowed to smoke at school! She is keeping herself busy with painting classes and yoga classes, and she is learning Danish. Rebecca and Amanda have been to visit a Danish museum and a cathedral, and that's all the touristy news I've heard so far.

Says Amanda: "Things don't seem as weird as they did when I first got here, but I still think the food they eat is weird. The people at school think I'm weird because I eat peanut butter and jam sandwiches and macaroni and cheese. They're weird."

Amanda also warns us: "It's so easy to find bright pink clothes here so I'm going to wear so much pink when I get back!!!! hehe!"

We'll be looking forward to seeing Amanda (in pink!) and Rebecca again at the beginning of May!

Showing the World Who We Really Are

by Michael Greenberg

Here are some of the things that have been crossing my mind as I try to think about what a Sudbury school is and how to attract people to the model.

For starters I must observe that the basic philosophical highlights of the school – Freedom, Democracy, Responsibility – do not resonate with most people as a desirable or workable educational system.

I have also noticed that the fears that these ideas generate in people are mostly immune to any logical argument on our behalf.

A lot of people seem to feel like this model of education would work only for a very special kind of person (not their "average kid" – of course!) We have always instinctively shied away from this, saying (and believing) that the school can work for almost anybody.

We feel that an inability to deal with the rigors of the school reflects some prior damage to the child from either another schooling experience or from an unsupportive home environment. Deep down, we think the model will work for any "normal", undamaged human being.

On the other hand, in apparent contradiction, we talk about how difficult this school really is: the struggle to find out what and who you want to be; taking total responsibility for yourself.

I think that this contradiction may be part of why we have such a hard time talking to the world about what we do.

I have been seeing the model more and more as a very rigorous type of education. Like many rigorous programs (West Point, Harvard) it has amazing results for those who are able to cut it. West Point expects people to wash out, but West Point is full and is respected as a way of educating certain people for a particular type of mental discipline.

A Sudbury education emphasizes a set

of expected outcomes. It is a very useful set of traits, but not a set that I believe most people expect their children to fully possess.

What are they? Here's a partial list. It is in no particular order but numbered for convenience:

- #1 Living an examined life.
- #2 Taking full responsibility for your life – not blaming the world/others.
- #3 Being law abiding – working within society's rules, or living outside them, but not breaking or ignoring them.
- #4 Valuing experience over credentials – considering experts, grades, degrees, and official sanction to be without real merit on their own, and useful only when needed realistically to pursue one's goals.
- #5 Believing that if you get your life right, the money and the good job will somehow materialize. This is a belief that is common to elites – not so common among regular folks.
- #6 Rejecting violence as a means of problem solving.
- #7 Embracing merit / Rejecting prejudice – not to be PC or pay lip service to "diversity", but because prejudice can mask merit.
- #8 Wanting life to be fulfilling/meaningful/fun.



Wow! Look at that list! Not once did freedom or democracy come up explicitly. They are the "Means", the "Learning Environment", which produce the set of

Announcements

- We are off for **Spring Break** starting Monday, March 29th. Our doors will reopen on Monday, April 5th
- The **Easter** long weekend includes Friday, April 9th and Monday April 12th.
- Our next Open Houses for newly interested families are at 7:30 PM on Tuesday, April 13th and Thursday, April 29th.
- **Argyll will begin taking registrations for next year as of the end of March. If you're planning on using Argyll next year, we highly recommend you register early with them as last year they filled up fast and turned people away in September!**

outcomes – a set of character traits that, as I look at it and think about it, essentially defines someone with a vested interest in our orderly society who feels that his needs can be met within that society even if he is on the fringe of its core values.

I think that Sudbury Valley trains people to think like members of the top elite. I'm talking way past the notion of money or power. I am talking about being a person who feels that the systems of our society fundamentally support his goals, actions and desires.

The traditional educational system tells the common student that he must crush a part of himself to find his place in a society that he must struggle to be a productive member of. The student is presumed to be, like the vast majority of people in any system, a follower, a person who should consider himself lucky to be a useful cog in the plan of someone who leads.

I would define a "Leader" as someone who leads, first and foremost, *himself* in his own life. He may also in the course of building his dreams and enterprises end up leading others.



A "Follower" feels hemmed in by societal constraints and immediately feels like he must make many concessions in order to survive.

A "Leader" realizes that life offers him a rich pallet of choices. He realizes that he will be required to work hard to achieve real results, and that both the work and the results should be fulfilling.

He accepts that compromise, failure, and things not going your way are an integral part of leadership, not exceptions to it. He has learned all this in the real experience of life at the school: in the School Meeting, in hours of conversation, in all the things he has tried to understand and master on his own.

It is only in the last few decades that our society may have become rich enough to *turn everyone into a leader. Most adults still see themselves as followers.* I think what we have seen in Sudbury Valley is that *many children of the middle class have no difficulty in picturing themselves as leaders even if their parents don't share that confidence.*

I always find myself flabbergasted by a parent who worries that his kid won't be able to support himself, won't be able to find a good job, in the richest country in history. I have never given my child's abilities in that department a moment's thought. I have always thought that such a parent is, well, weird, or at the very least horribly out of touch with modern economics.

Now I suddenly realize that they are the norm. I have been trained to think like an elite, a leader. And so was everyone I went to school with, except for the washouts who either didn't feel they could cut it, or had parents who freaked out or did not support them.

We all come into this world with unknown talents and intelligence. Then life happens. Habits of thought, styles of personal interaction, expectations and temperament all form early in life. Our school is not an easy place. It may be an impossible place for someone who does not believe in themselves.

Many, maybe most, parents do not really trust their children at the level that the school's philosophy requires to be fully supported at home. Surprisingly, in spite of this, many, maybe most, *younger children* have a shot at taking the good



energy of early childhood's enormous learning experiences and succeeding at our rigorous program anyway. Heck, when you've just taught yourself how to walk, talk and make some sense of this big world, how hard

can it be make all your own choices about life all day long?

But I think that the older you get, the more you will be affected by doubts that your parents/friends have. As they mature, most children will have internalized

a logic of self-doubt that makes the rigors of total personal responsibility almost impossible. We have watched kids spend months or even years decompressing, getting rid of anger. That is a big thing, but it is not the powerful set of traits I discussed earlier. It is a prelude. Often, with parents who don't really believe in their child or in the school's philosophy, that is all that can happen.

We know from experience that only a tiny percentage of people who encounter the school or its ideas think it makes sense or has any relevance to them. Although our school has been very helpful for a broad range of desperate parents and their angry, damaged_kids, the real core of the school is based on a group of healthy, positive parents who believe in their intel-



l i g e n t , hardworking, responsible kids.

T h e y want their children to have rich, fulfilled lives. They have seen the magic in their child's soul and they

want to see it flower. They cannot see it crushed.

Often, a person who is enlightened, who is in fact in the lucky vanguard of our society, will not use the word "elite" to describe their thinking or their position. "Elite" has overtones of power, wealth and snobbery. But, like the powerful and the rich, this person does not worry continuously about failure or about security, rather seeing life as an exciting adventure. This is an "elite" of a positive sort. This is us.

Traditional "elite" schools often cultivate a snobby, "rich" kind of image, the shallow and unsupported idea that having money in and of itself will qualify a person for something.

However, some "elite" schools cultivate the idea of excellence, merit and hard work.

Sudbury's idea has never had a connection with wealth either as a qualifier or as an objective of a meaningful life.

But excellence, merit and hard work are absolutely essential if you are not going to be bored out of your skull at a Sud-



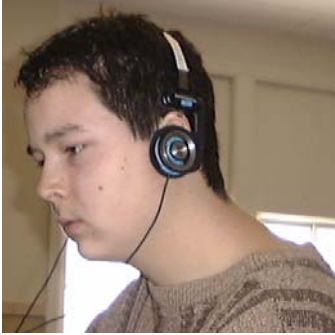
bury school. And the worst part is that no one is even there to tell you which hard work to do! The hardest part is finding the work.

For the first time since I was a kid I am wondering if the description of freedom and democracy

should come first, as the basis of a new person's exposure to the school, or should it be later on as the mechanics of how your kid will be put through an experience that will make them a powerful person. *Maybe it is the powerful person that your kid will become that should be emphasized.*

They will learn to think for themselves.

To do intense analytical thinking. To deal with multiple viewpoints in subjective



situations where there is no "truth". Along the way they will pick up reading, writing, basic math, an ability to speak clear, logical arguments in matters of deep ethical complexity. They will learn how to find the information they need through multiple sources (internet, books, trial and error, talking to people who are in the field). They will learn how to set priorities and allocate resources. They will learn how to be useful to others and how to be responsible participants in a complex society. They will learn how to create, enforce and obey the rule of law in an environment with no tolerance for violence, theft or vandalism. At graduation, they will be adult in ways that most traditionally schooled students can never hope to be, as a reading of our graduation thesis defenses will immediately confirm.

They will possess the set of powerful character traits that the Sudbury system imbues in those who have spent sufficient time in the program. Above all, they will live an examined life that is



fulfilling, meaningful and fun.

HOW WILL THEY LEARN THIS?

Through rigorous freedom. Through total personal responsibility. Through



mandatory participation in the school's legal system as an investigator, and

enforcer of a clearly written, sensible set of rules that are enacted, amended, or repealed by the same one person = one vote democratic structure that runs the all of the school's day to day business. And through constant interaction with other students and with the exceptional adults who staff the school – adults who are chosen through a grueling process completely unlike the hiring procedures of any other school, ensuring a level of dedication that has no parallel.

And most of all they will learn it from deep inside themselves, in the place from which all true learning always comes.



Honesty

by Nicolette Groeneveld

For children (and adults!) telling the truth can be a very scary thing. According to a certain Dr. Robin Alter, "The natural response to being confronted with a transgression is to lie about it...Children lie because they are not strong enough yet to tell the truth...The child's fragile embryonic ego says 'Oh my god, if I've done this horrible thing, I must be a horrible monster. I can't possibly admit to this because then everyone will know what a horrible person I am.'"

So what happens when you put children in an environment where the transgression of a rule is not treated as a big deal, where it is not dealt with in a shaming way, but instead is dealt with via a simple process whose basic message is, "You made a mistake. What would you like to do to make up for it?"

What happens is you get children who tell the truth.

One of the first things one of our newest students learned is that JC is a lot easier if you just tell the truth. And that's true. We've had a few students who have tried the lying path, and they have quickly learned that when they lie, there's someone close by who is willing to speak the truth. They've also learned that losing the trust of the community is a big deal.

That's not to say that telling the truth is always easy. There are times in JC when emotions run high and the person written up is confronted with the anger or hurt feelings of another person. There are also times when the accused knows the consequence s/he will get will be tough. And indeed, many times people who are written up present a battery of excuses for why their transgression happened. But in the end, when asked to plead guilty or not guilty, the JC gets the truth.

This willingness to take responsibility is a beautiful thing to witness, and it speaks to the safety of the JC process. It also speaks well of the people in JC who are not only as objective and reasonable as possible during JC meetings, but also don't hold grudges—issues die once JC is over. Last but not least, the honesty we see at our school speaks well of all those who are written up: they truly are willing to face confrontation, own up to their mistakes and correct them.

Never a shortage of reasons to love being a part of this school!