

Educational Existentialism and the Sudbury Valley School

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THE self-actualization view of motivation asserts that human nature is basically good and that an individual will choose what is good for his own growth. This view embodies Ruth Benedict's concept of synergy, the automatic benefits to society resulting from the self-direction of psychologically healthy human beings. It encompasses Maslow's B Values,¹ Laing's alienation remedies, and Arthur Combs' phenomenological approach to learning. It is the cornerstone of Moustakas' existentialism—"Only the person himself can develop his potentialities, no matter how fervently and exhaustively another person may wish to do this for him."²

One school which claims to follow the principles of educational existentialism is the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. It claims to be the only school "in which all persons possess, from the moment they enter, all the individual rights adults have in the country . . . in which political democracy is the form of govern-

ment . . . where equal opportunity is available to all."³

I recently visited the Sudbury Valley School as a first step in identifying learning environments which promote self-actualization and man's "will to meaning."⁴

It was uncanny to find that although none of the school's founders had heard of Moustakas, his principles permeated the school. The central idea of the school is individual freedom and responsibility. In practice, this means the absence of authoritarian hierarchical structures, required courses, assigned groups, prescribed number of classroom hours, grades, evaluations, or degrees—all the hallmarks of the present educational system.

The stated key features of the school's operation include:

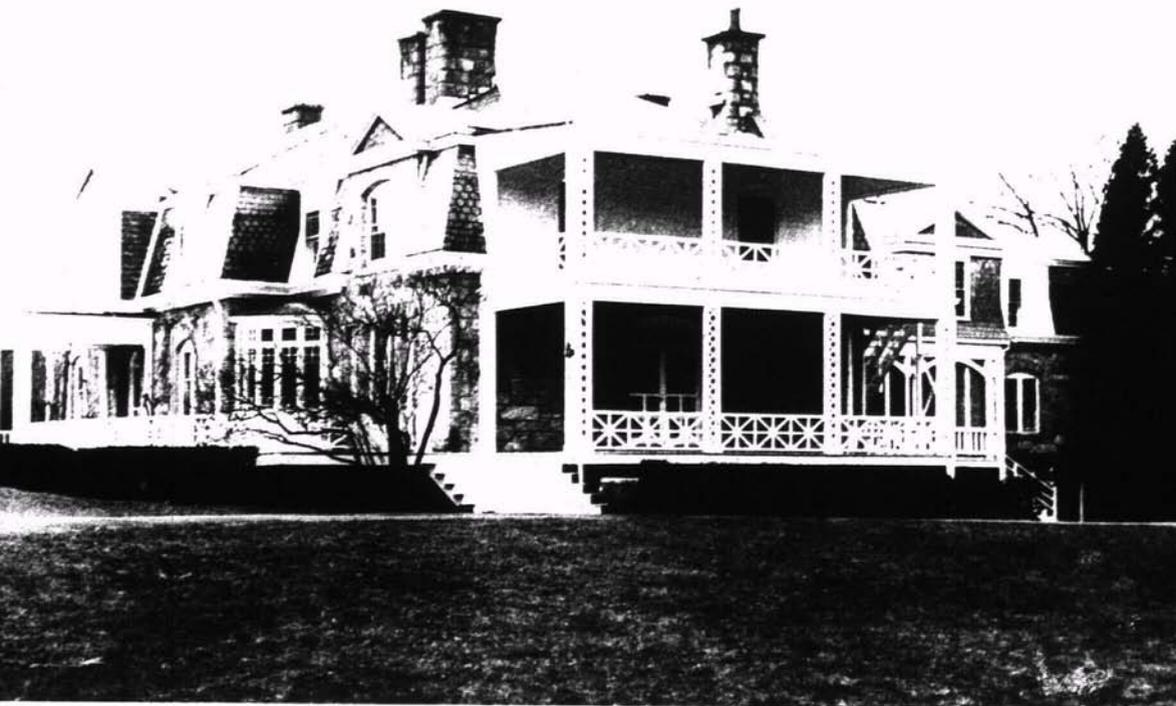
1. Learning through self-motivation and self-regulation. Required courses are considered unnecessary because people will discover for themselves the things they must know if they

¹ A. H. Maslow. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: The Viking Press, 1971.

² Clark Moustakas. *Personal Growth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Howard A. Doyle Publishing Company, 1969.

³ *About the Sudbury Valley School*. Framingham, Massachusetts: Sudbury Valley Press, 1971.

⁴ Viktor E. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1962.



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are allowed to come into contact with the real world.

2. Equal status to all pursuits. The school considers all areas of investigation equally valid, whether they be academic, professional, technical, artistic, athletic, or anything else.

3. Evaluation through self-criticism. No grades or tests or other external evaluations are imposed on students. The school questions the legitimacy of anyone setting himself up as the judge and evaluator of another's thoughts.

4. Teaching based on interest. No one is required to teach specific subjects.

5. Spontaneous formation of learning groups, centered on common interests.

6. Teacher retention based on student demand.

7. Direct involvement of parents in the education of their children through the town meeting.

8. Community participation in regulating

the school's activities. The school is open to members of the community, who are welcome to come, to observe, to learn, and to teach.

All the features are seen as organically related, requiring one another. That is how Maslow saw the B Values, truth, beauty, justice—interrelated and inseparable.⁵ Piecemeal innovation is rejected by the school's philosophy because of the tension created in an otherwise traditional structure and the high risk of failure.

The school was started by Dan Greenberg and his wife, Hanna. Dan, with a Ph.D. in physics from Columbia University, taught at Barnard until 1965. Hanna had been offered a position in biochemistry at MIT.

They went to Framingham to found a school where students really wanted to learn. In three years they mobilized enough support to purchase the old Bowditch estate, with

⁵ A. H. Maslow, *Eupsychian Management*. Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1965.

13 acres of land. A small group of teachers and parents formed the nucleus of committed people.

The clippings in the school's scrapbook show how difficult the first two years were. Now, the school is small, private, and voluntary, certainly distinct advantages. The goal of the school is, however, to become part of an alternative system within public education and to demonstrate the viability of a new educational model.

The students I met during my four days at SVS were interested, involved, and content. While I was there I saw them involved in photography, gardening, reading, sewing, music, ballet, handicrafts, visits to cultural centers, and all the other activities of any school. The most self-directed students appeared to be the four- to six-year-olds. They were busy all day long and did not seem to require direction or supervision.

My obvious discomfort in watching completely unsupervised four- and five-year-olds prompted Dan's assurances that there had not been any accidents in four years. One six-year-old has become very knowledgeable about 16th century tapestries and refuses to visit any of the other museum exhibits at this time.

The four-year-olds have an equal vote at the School Meeting, where all the policies of the school are determined. In reality, four-year-olds and many other students seldom attend the School Meeting unless they are directly involved in the agenda. Most of the time it is just too boring.

Most of the students with whom I spoke had been unsuccessful in the public schools. Some had been suspended. Some had refused to attend. All agreed that school had never made any sense to them until they came to the Sudbury Valley School.

James had been in the school about three weeks and was still a little lost. I played chess with him in the smoking room and he admitted that he had not done much except a lot of thinking in the past three weeks. Dan Greenberg said that new students always do the most talking to visitors.

Mary had been a student at Wheelock College in Boston. Her constant frustration

at not being able to put innovative theories into practice in the Boston public schools led her to SVS. She plans to confront the learning theories of Piaget and Gesell with the observations she is making about learning at SVS.

Jan McDaniel had been a music teacher in the public schools. He is the treasurer of SVS and their music specialist. The toughest part about being at the school, Jan said, was the awareness that there could be no going back. He could not imagine ever returning to the public schools or sending his children there in spite of the financial sacrifices. Dan admitted that most staff members hold part-time jobs or need additional support from working spouses.

Dan urges the staff members to recognize the revolutionary mission of the school. He hopes that this revolution will move to the operation of satellite public schools with their own self-contained organizations and campuses. They would obtain financial support from tax monies on a par with the per pupil expenditures in other schools. Parents in the community would be free to decide whether or not they wanted their children to attend the school. Steadfast adherence to the school's democratic principles would be maintained and the community kept fully informed of all developments.

The hoped-for final step would be the general conversion of the public schools to "the democratic institutions they must become."⁶ However, the rights of those who prefer regimented schools should also be respected, with alternatives available for them. The alternative school concept is seen as part of our democratic heritage before the era of compulsory mass education.

If we want schools to prepare for life in a democracy, rather than for life in a totalitarian state, then the Sudbury Valley School prototype is offered as one answer.

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⁶ *The Crisis in American Education.* Framingham, Massachusetts: The Sudbury Valley Press, 1970.

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