

Running Head: Self-Directed Student Attitudes

Self-Directed Learning and Student Attitudes

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Abstract

It is a commonly held belief that students who enjoy their experience of school perform better academically. Thus, educators often struggle with the questions of how best to motivate students and how to make learning fun. Some parents and educators, however, have simply moved away from traditional educational practices and are choosing to let students take charge of their own learning. The intent of this study is to evaluate the attitudes of students in two Sudbury model schools — schools in which students from ages 4-19 are completely responsible for their own education — and to show the positive correlation between freedom and choice in the learning environment and positive student attitudes.

This study involves the opinions of 23 students from two Sudbury model schools, forming a small focus group. The schools both volunteered for the study, and students were asked if they would like to participate. The students who participated ranged in age from 4-16. Each completed a questionnaire that included both scaled questions and open-ended questions. Overall, students reported having a very positive experience of school as assessed by the questionnaire. There were also recognizable trends in their narrative answers that pointed towards an overall appreciation for the level of freedom in their schools.

In general, the study proved that in the group surveyed there is a positive correlation between freedom in the educational environment and the students' attitudes about school. This study points to the validity of self-direction in the learning environment, and notes several options for follow-up studies.

Self-Directed Learning and Student Attitudes

One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year. — Albert Einstein

Any teacher who has spent time in the classroom has experienced Einstein's predicament at some point. Even good students who are usually motivated and high-achieving at some time will come across a subject for which they have no interest, and the job of the teacher becomes similar to that of the prison warden – keeping the students in line, and forcing facts on the students involved. Educational authors often write about creative ways to engage and motivate students, and teachers work with all sorts of systems and theories to keep their students interested in the curriculum.

Some educators and parents, however, are looking in an entirely different direction. Based on the theory that all human beings are curious and want to learn, some schools and homeschoolers are turning the direction of education over to the students themselves. In these schools and unschooling households, “students from preschool through high school age explore the world freely, at their own pace and in their own unique ways. They learn to think for themselves, and learn to use Information Age tools to unearth the knowledge they need from multiple sources. They develop the ability to make clear logical arguments, and deal with complex ethical issues. Through self-initiated activities, they pick up the basics; as they direct

their lives, they take responsibility for outcomes, set priorities, allocate resources, and work with others in a vibrant community” (Sudbury Valley School, 2006).

Briefly, Sudbury model schools are those that are modeled after the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts, use only a self-directed curriculum, and run their communities as working democracies in which each student and staff member has an equal vote in all decisions. Students in these environments do not suffer from the stresses of traditional schools, nor do they lose interest in learning simply because information is forced upon them. Graduates of these environments go on to earn degrees from prestigious universities such as Harvard and Stanford, and/or pursue careers that are important to them, such as being a professional musician or forest ranger.

In a recent study of graduates from the Sudbury Valley School, most students reported having jobs that provided opportunities for “service to others. Other factors that appeared to stand out were challenging work, meaningful work, relating to other people, fun, and hands-on work” (Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka, 2005).

It is also a commonly held belief in educational circles that students who enjoy school tend to do better academically. It would be rare to find an ‘A’ student who would report that they hate school and don’t want to go to class. Students who are happy, feel liked by their teachers, and enjoy learning have more positive attitudes about school and have better grades.

Self-directed learning environments, while still few in number, are gaining in popularity across the globe. At the same time, teachers in traditional educational settings struggle with ways to motivate students and foster a love of learning in their classrooms. This study is intended to offer one piece of research that will illustrate the effectiveness of student choice and freedom in the educational environment, namely that students are happier and, as a result, enjoy learning in

an environment of freedom and choice. The study provides suggestions to traditional educators who are challenged to increase student motivation, and it also adds to the limited body of research surrounding self-directed learning environments.

Essentially, this study sets out to prove that students in self-directed learning environments (in particular Sudbury model schools) enjoy school and enjoy learning. As a result, their natural love of learning is unhindered and the students are able to continue their natural growth and learning processes in a positive way. The scarcity of research pointing to the effectiveness of self-directed learning is a limiting factor in the unschooling movement. While personal stories of success abound, a larger body of quantitative research is needed. This study attempts to grow the small base of available research by exploring the correlation between freedom and choice in the school environment as they affect and promote positive student attitudes.

The study addresses the following questions:

Do students in self-directed learning environments have a positive experience of school?

What would students in these schools want to change about their learning experiences?

By engaging in these questions, it is the intent of this study to begin to formulate evidence that will allow for traditional classrooms to incorporate elements of self-directed learning, as well as give educators in self-directed environments new evidence with which to continue their important work.

Literature Review

I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems of education. They seem to me to be built upon the supposition that every child is a kind of idiot who

must be taught to think. Whereas if the child is left to himself, he will think more and better, if less "showily". Let him come and go freely, let him touch real things and combine his impressions for himself... Teaching fills the mind with artificial associations that must be got rid of before the child can develop independent ideas out of actual experiences. — Anne Sullivan, mentor of Helen Keller

Very little modern research has been conducted in the area of self-directed learning. Historically, the benefits of allowing children to explore the world and learn what they need to know in the process are well-known and honored. Tribal cultures taught their children by allowing them to engage in the world with adults and older children at an age-appropriate level, rather than by isolating children to teach them needed skills. Today, there is a growing body of Americans choosing to follow a similar path by unschooling their children. Unschooling can be defined as “allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world, as their parents can comfortably bear. The advantage of this method is that it doesn't require the parent to become someone else, i.e. a professional teacher pouring knowledge into child-vessels on a planned basis. Instead you live and learn together, pursuing questions and interests as they arise and using conventional schooling on an ‘on demand’ basis, if at all” (Farenga, 2003). There are also schools embracing these concepts, such as free schools, Sudbury model schools, and other democratic schools, all of whom use self-directed learning as their basis. While it can be difficult to compare students who direct their own learning with those who are in structured schools or curriculum-driven homeschooling environments — mostly due to the nature of self-directed learning, in which children may learn something much earlier or much later than their peers — there are several studies that show the many benefits of self-directed learning. Students who

direct all or part of their learning tend to do better academically, are more creative, and have better social skills and more positive attitudes about school.

Unschooling and self-directed learning have recently captured the attention of the mainstream media. *The New York Times* recently featured an article entitled “Home Schoolers Content to Take Children’s Lead” (November 2006). The article outlines a typical unschooling scenario, in which a family of four children follows its interests and structures its own days accordingly. The article also raises concerns often heard by those who have not experienced this model of education first-hand. “It is not clear to me how they will transition to a structured world and meet the most basic requirements for reading, writing and math,’ said Luis Huerta, a professor of public policy and education at Teachers College of Columbia University, whose national research includes a focus on home schooling.” The topic of self-directed learning, or unschooling, often sparks heated debates. Some parents will adamantly defend their right to educate their children as they choose, as well as the benefits of allowing their children to direct their own learning. Others call unschooling lazy and even abusive, making comments such as “The first set of parents [on a November 2006 episode of the Dr. Phil show] are not thinking about their children’s future. Most likely those children will be unable to hold down jobs” (bookworm31602, 2006). Regardless of public opinion, however, the scant research available shows positive benefits come from allowing students the opportunity to direct their learning.

After almost forty years in operation, the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham Massachusetts conducted an extensive study of their graduates. Contrary to the opinion of bookworm31602, the study showed that graduates of this self-directed learning environment able not only to hold down jobs, but tended to seek jobs that were challenging as well as rewarding.

“The enormous percentage of the interviewees who are engaged in entrepreneurial work, or are in management positions, testifies to the extent to which challenge, creativity, and constant stimulation are an integral part of their daily work life” (Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka 2005).

More relevant to the research at hand, however, is the experience of students while in school. A recent study conducted by Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) compared both academic and social scores as well as attitudes of students in a public run charter Montessori program with those of students who had attempted to get into the Montessori program through the school’s lottery system but were not chosen. Groups of five-year-olds and twelve-year-olds were studied. Montessori schools allow for extended periods of self-directed learning, although they use a mixed-method approach and require much teacher-directed curriculum as well. Lillard and Else-Quest found that the five-year-old children in the Montessori program out-scored their peers on letter/word identification, word decoding, and math skills tests. They were also more likely (43% versus 18% of responses) to use higher-level reasoning in a problem solving test involving solving social problems. Twelve-year-old students were given a story completion test, and the Montessori students wrote more creative and elaborate stories. A social test and survey were also administered. “On a questionnaire regarding their feelings about school, Montessori children indicated having a greater sense of community, responding more positively to items like, ‘Students in my class really care about each other,’ and ‘Students in this class treat each other with respect,’” (Lillard and Else-Quest, pg 1894).

There are also less tangible benefits of self-directed learning. Wolk (2001) outlines the benefits of exploratory time, which he defines as an hour or more per day in which students pursue projects and topics of their own choosing. Among these benefits he states that exploratory time “nurtures a love for learning...encourages meaningful learning through intrinsic

motivation...creates true communities of learners...nurtures creativity...develops self-esteem and celebrates uniqueness” (pp. 57-58). Wolk recommends that classroom teachers turn over at least 20% of the school day to students in order to achieve these benefits. He states that trusting students is paramount to the success of such time. “We must trust that students have educational and intellectual interests and curiosities, deeply meaningful questions about the world, and an innate desire to know and understand. We must trust that students want to learn and that they are willing to work hard in that learning. The next step is ours. We must give them the time to own their learning” (pp 59). Wolk’s thoughtful article outlines a clear way in which self-directed learning can be successfully combined with traditional classroom practices.

Another element of self-direction in the school environment is that of student motivation. In *Student Motivation: Cultivating a Love of Learning* (1999), Linda Lumsden states, “Failing to give students responsibility and choice dulls their motivation and reduces their level of commitment to one another and to the entire school community...If schools are truly trying to educate the whole person, then offering students ample opportunities to exercise responsibility and choice will be a priority” (pp. 72). While the focus of this book is not self-direction in the learning environment, Lumsden does list several factors that effect student motivation, among them meaningfulness of the task at hand and autonomy. “Like all human beings, students want to have some control over what activities they pursue and when and how they choose to engage in them” (pp. 25). She relates this level of choice and autonomy directly to the level of a student’s motivation in the classroom.

Motivation and autonomy are some of the elements that effect students’ attitudes about school. Another extensive study regarding student attitudes, also involving Montessori students, was conducted by Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005). The researchers paired approximately

160 middle-school aged students in Montessori-structured middle schools with similar students in traditional schools. The purpose of the study was to evaluate student attitudes and social contexts. “Montessori students reported more support from teachers (i.e., teachers were interested in students, they listened to what they had to say, etc.), more order in the classroom (i.e., fewer disruptions from students), and a greater feeling of emotional/psychological safety (i.e., not being put down by teachers or students)” (pp. 69). In general, the Montessori students had a more positive view of school than their counterparts.

Other authors have written extensively about the importance of self-directed learning. John Holt and John Taylor Gatto are the most notable authors in the field. Each has written several books on the subject, including Holt’s *How Children Learn* (1967) and *How Children Fail* (1964). Both books look at the conflict between natural learning processes and the setting of traditional schools. Though these books were written several decades ago, they are still noted as some of the most influential books in the unschooling movement.

The small body of research surrounding self-directed learning is a limiting factor for anyone who is attempting to discuss its merits. However, when looking at some of the studies that have been conducted, there begins to form a clear picture of the beneficial nature of such learning. The studies mentioned point to the notable benefits of self-directed learning, as well as the advantages to students who are allowed to direct all or part of their learning. The additional research surrounding students’ attitudes as they relate to freedom and choice in the classroom begins to show that students who are allowed choice in the school environment are happier and more satisfied with their educational processes. This, ultimately, is a goal of all educators – fostering a love of learning and the natural learning process.

Methods

Sampling

Students from two schools filled out questionnaires for this study. Each school is a Sudbury model school, and therefore all students are involved in self-directed learning environments. Two schools were chosen in order to expand the sampling size and in order to compare similar environments.

13 of the 14 students at Sego Lily School in Murray, Utah participated in the study. Sego Lily School (SLS) is a small, private Sudbury-model school in its third year of operation. The campus is located near two large parks and a community recreation center. The building and surrounding grounds on a half acre, plus the parks and recreation center, make up the extended campus. There are four staff members who work at SLS and a host of volunteers. Students at the school range in age from 4 years to 16 years old. The average age of these students is 7.75 years. Sego Lily School is a mixed socio-economic community, with nine of the fourteen students receiving sliding-scale tuition discounts due to income levels. The remaining five students pay full tuition with no discounts. The amount of time spent at the school ranges from 2 1/3 years (the entire time the school has been open) to 1/3 year (students who began in the 2006-2007 school year). The average length of attendance is 9.5 months, or slightly more than one full school year. SLS was chosen as a venue for this study due to the researcher's relationship as a parent and staff member at the school.

The second school involved in the study is Fairhaven School (FHS), located in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Ten students at Fairhaven participated in the study. Fairhaven is a small private school of approximately 75 students, ages 5 to 18, and is now in its' 9th year of operation. The campus is located on 12 acres, and includes streams, woods, and open space. There are

seven staff members at FHS. The students included in the study ranged from 5 to 12 years of age, with an average age of 9 years 3 months. Students in this age range were asked to volunteer for the study, which kept the ages at the two schools in a similar range. Approximately 20% of students at Fairhaven receive some type of reduced tuition, although it is not known what percentage of study participants receive these discounts. The amount of time spent at the school by study participants ranges from 7 years to 2 months. The average length of attendance is 2.5 years. All of the Sudbury model schools in the United States that have been in operation for three years or more were invited to participate in this study, and Fairhaven was chosen due to the age range of their students (similar to that of Segoe Lily School), and their eagerness to participate.

The sample populations are indicative of the Sudbury community in general. However, there is less of a correlation to the general unschooling community, primarily due to economic factors. The nature of most families that homeschool is that one parent stays home, making a financial sacrifice in order to keep the children at home. Families that can afford private schools, whether paying full or reduced tuition, generally exist in a higher income bracket. There are also limitations to comparing the sample group with the general population of children in the United States, or even in the two sampled communities. Again, there is the economic factor – comparing students in free versus private education often separates higher from lower socio-economic status. In addition, families who choose Sudbury model schools are often those that are willing to think outside the box and throw aside many cultural expectations of what education should be. Many families in the Sudbury community — and the unschooling community in general — refer to themselves as ‘radical’ or ‘alternative.’ Despite these limitations, the sampling does include a wide range of students, that could be seen as similar to the make-up of many families in the United States.

Measures

Measures were designed to answer the two primary research questions: Do students in self-directed learning environments have a positive experience of school? What would students in these schools want to change about their learning experiences? To address the first question, an average of each student's answers to 12 of the 13 scaled answer questions was created, forming a "School Opinion Score." The 13th question was not included in the average, as it was designed to invoke a negative answer (Question 4: I can't wait to leave school at the end of the day). Averages were also taken for each question for the individual schools, and the survey population as a whole, to create an overall picture of students' opinions. To address the second question, the narrative answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed. Results are addressed in narrative form.

Design

The design of the study essentially created a focus group of 23 students from two Sudbury model schools. While the questionnaire could be partially analyzed quantitatively, this study is primarily qualitative in nature. Since the major topic involves the attitudes and opinions of the students who participated, there is little evidence that the data collected is representative of all students at all Sudbury model schools.

There are two primary issues of validity in this study. First, when the questionnaire was read to students, there exists the possibility that students may have been less likely to answer honestly. In particular, the questions that ask students about their opinions of the staff members at their schools may have been answered in ways that the students thought the researchers (both

staff members at the respective schools) would want to hear. It is useful to note, however, that in Sudbury model schools frank, honest discussions between people of all ages are common. While this is a potential issue in the validity of the study, it is less likely to effect the outcomes than the second major issue which is that the answers to any questionnaire are suspect, due to the degree to which they depend on personal opinion and experience. Any student who was having a 'bad day' could have answered questions differently than s/he would have on a 'good day.' In particular, younger children have a tendency to be more now-oriented, answering questions from their current feelings rather than their overall experience. Since this study involved students as young as four years old, it is highly likely that if the study were to be repeated on another day with the same sampled population, the results would vary slightly. This is the nature of young children, and, as such, there is no way with the data collected for this study, to compensate for this possibility.

Procedures

The two schools that offered to take part in the study were given a copy of the questionnaire to be used, and students were asked to participate in the study. After obtaining informed consent documents from all study participants, each was given a questionnaire to complete (see Appendix A). This questionnaire included thirteen scaled questions, for which the students rated their answer on a 1-5 scale, and six open-ended questions to which the students responded in narrative form. Many of the younger students were read the questionnaire and the researcher noted and dictated their answers. This process took approximately ten minutes with each student. The data was then collected and analyzed in two ways: the numerical data was averaged for the scaled questions, for each individual, each school, and for the total survey

population; the narrative data was analyzed for trends in the students' responses. Trends in the attitudes of students, including the degree to which they like school, and what they don't like about their school experiences, were noted.

Each school will receive a copy of this completed study. In addition, families were given the option to receive a copy of the study as well; those families will be mailed a copy of the final product.

Results

The results of this study will be presented in two parts: an analysis of the numerical data obtained from the thirteen scaled questions, and a narrative analysis of the open-ended questions.

Part 1: Numerical Data from Scaled Questions

The purpose of the scaled questions was to obtain a general picture of each student's opinions and attitudes about his/her school experience. These twelve questions focused on their opinions of school overall (*I like school, school is fun for me, I want to go to school in the mornings*), their experiences with friends (*I have friends at school, I get to spend time with my friends, we find interesting ways to spend our time at school*), their academic experience (*I study things I enjoy at school, the staff supports my interests*), and their experience of their teachers and staff (*I like the staff at school, the staff likes me, the staff knows a lot about me, the staff knows what is important to me*). For these questions, the students were asked to rate each statement on a 1-5 scale, where one was 'strongly disagree,' two was 'disagree,' three was 'neutral,' four was 'agree,' and five was 'strongly agree.' The following figure shows the average score for each question at each of the schools.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Overall, the opinions of the students are positive, with no question averaging below 3.62. Most of the questions (17 out of 24) averaged 4.1 or above, indicating that the students surveyed have an overall positive experience of school. There are some slight differences noted between the two schools. Overall, students at Fairhaven have a slightly more positive experience of school. This may be due to the fact that the school has been in operation longer, and therefore has a more stable school culture, as well as a larger student body.

The average score of all answers for each student is referred to as a “School Opinion Score,” or SOS. The SOS’s for each student are shown in the following figure. The scores are reported in order of students’ age.

Insert Table 1 about here

Students at Seego Lily had an SOS score ranging between 3.12 and 5. The average score was 4.15. Students at Fairhaven had an SOS score ranging between 3.83 and 5. The average score was 4.59. Two factors to note: First, the lowest score at Fairhaven School was from a student who had only been attending for two months. As a result his answers to the questions about staff (knowing a lot about him, liking him, and supporting his interests) and friends (having friends, spending time with them, and finding interesting things to do with them at

school) were significantly lower than most other Fairhaven students. Second, the lowest score at Sego Lily was from a student who had just had a fight with her best friend, which may have colored her responses about friends at school.

In order to begin to analyze the overall opinions of students in self-directed learning environments, the data was again analyzed with the two school populations combined. The following data represents the combined answers of students at both schools.

An average was taken of the answers to each question on the questionnaire, using the answers from all students surveyed. Question 4 was designed to elicit a negative response, and is therefore reported last.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Two trends exist in this analysis. First, all but one question (when question number four is not taken into account) had an average ranging from 4.13 to 4.96 indicating that students agreed or strongly agreed to the positive statements about school. Second, the one question that elicited a less positive response (Question 10, “My staff members know a lot about me”) — an average of 3.83 overall — was met with many questions from the students. Many said, “I don’t really know,” or “How should I know?” before giving their numerical answers to the question.

An overall SOS score was also derived by averaging the SOS scores of each student. Again, question four was left out of this analysis, as it was designed to elicit a negative response. The average SOS of all respondents was 4.53.

Part 2: Narrative Data from Open-Ended Questions

Many trends emerged when looking at students' answers to the six open-ended questions. It is useful to note that some students made more than one response in several categories, so it is possible that the total number of responses reported may equal more than the 23 students questioned.

Question 1: What is your favorite thing about school?

Eight respondents reported that they enjoyed the freedom they have at school, or elements of the freedom, such as being able to graduate early or not being told how to spend their day. Seven respondents made statements about their friends, being able to hang out with friends, make friends, or play with friends. Eight respondents stated that they most enjoyed playing, playing with friends, or cited specific games they enjoy playing. Other responses from students included writing complaints (the judicial systems in both schools involve writing complaints when rules are broken, which are then heard by a judicial committee), going on field trips, having time to write books, and "Nothing is my favorite, I like it all."

Question 2: What is one thing you would change about your school if you could?

Eight students reported that they would like to change one of the rules at the school. The no running rule was mentioned by three Se-go Lily students. The eating at tables rule was mentioned by two Se-go Lily students and one Fairhaven student. The age limit to go outside alone rule was mentioned twice by Se-go Lily students. The age limit to go to the stream was mentioned by one Fairhaven student. Five students mentioned changes in the physical buildings — changing the Se-go Lily sunroom into a lab and growing more trees at Fairhaven, for example. Two students, one from each school, mentioned they would like to lower the noise levels at their respective schools. Three students from Fairhaven stated that they wanted to change nothing.

Question 3: Why do you like school? OR, If you don't like school why not?

Seven students responded that they liked making friends, having friends of all ages, and having time to spend with their friends. Five students responded that what they like about school is the freedom they have. Eight students stated that school was “fun” or “awesome.” This included one comment from a seven year old boy at Segoe Lily who said, “It’s fun here at Segoe Lily. My old school was HORRIBLE.” Six students reported having academic freedom, getting to learn what they want, or not having to learn things they don’t want to learn. Two students answered the why-not portion of the question as well. One reported that Fairhaven was dirty at times, and one reported that she didn’t like getting written up (to the Judicial Committee).

Question 4: What is your favorite thing to learn about? Do you get to spend time learning about that in school?

Answers to this question varied. Students mentioned animals, psychology, gymnastics, math, art, computers, dance, first aid, bugs, chemistry, general science, reading, writing, French, Spanish, spelling, cursive, playing, and getting certified for things (the process by which students and staff show they are capable of using the school’s equipment). All students (with one exception) replied that they spend time learning about these things in school. Two students summed up this part of the question up by saying “Duh” and “Is this a trick question at this school?”

Question 5: What is your favorite thing about the staff members you know at school? What is your least favorite thing?

Six students had positive comments about the staff that included their personalities, being funny, nice, and treating them like equals. Ten students answered that they like that the staff members do things with them, including teaching them, reading with them, and taking them places. Five students reported that they didn’t know what they liked the most. Eight students

either reported that there was nothing they didn't like, or otherwise did not answer the question. Eleven students reported that what they liked least was staff members getting angry, writing complaints, or telling the students what to do.

Question 6: Do you spend time with your friends at school? What do you like to do with them?

Twenty of the students reported that they spent time playing with their friends. Their answers included playing games, building forts, playing on the computer, and playing kitchen. One student reported that he mostly liked to talk with his friends, and one reported her favorite thing was to look up things on the computer. Only one student reported that she did not spend time with her friends while at school.

Overall Analysis

In general, the students reported that they liked their schools and the staff members that work there. It is interesting to note that students have the power to change rules at both Segó Lily and Fairhaven, and yet eight students reported wanting to change rules that have been in effect for some time. The themes that emerged in the narratives are consistent with a positive attitude about school.

Discussion

It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wreck and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty. — Albert Einstein

There were several trends apparent in the data collected. First, students surveyed at both Segoe Lily and Fairhaven schools have an overall positive attitude about school, as indicated by their SOS scores. Both the range of scores — from 3.12 to 5 — and the average score of 4.53 indicate an overall positive opinion of school by all respondents. Reflecting back on the original question asked by the study — “Do students in self-directed learning environments have a positive experience of school?” — the results show that, at least for the students who participated in the study, the answer is *yes*.

It would therefore follow that one way to increase student motivation and foster more positive attitudes about school could be to allow for students to direct all, or even some, of their learning. There are obviously more factors involved in having a positive experience of school than those that were addressed by this study; however the questions asked can help us to begin to formulate an overview of students’ experiences and opinions. This information is useful to educators in both traditional and self-directed environments. If students in self-directed, Sudbury model schools are happy with their experience, and — although not addressed in this study — are learning everything they need to know to be effective, successful adults, then including self-directed learning may be one way to transform our failing educational system.

A second trend noted in the numerical data was that there seems to be an overall satisfaction with school in general: 22 of 23 answered “5” to the statement “I like school,” and 19 students answered “5” to the statement “School is fun for me.” There is less consistency with the students’ answers regarding staff members, however. Students were unsure if staff members liked them, or if the staff knew a lot about them, or if the staff knew what is important to them. Most students did agree, overall, that staff members support their interest; the average answer for this question was 4.23. Since having a positive relationship with one’s teachers and mentors is

important to the overall experience of school and learning, it would be useful to explore these questions in more detail. Many students were not sure if the staff members liked them, so perhaps they could do their own asking to find the answer this question. After hearing this feedback from most of the students interviewed, any following studies would either eliminate this question, or re-word it so that students could be more certain of their answers.

The second question addressed by this study, namely “What would students in these schools want to change about their learning experiences?” is not as easily answered. However, the narrative data collected could be very useful for staff members at both Sego Lily and Fairhaven Schools, and perhaps other Sudbury model schools as well. Seeing the trends in students’ responses could give these staff members valuable feedback. For example, students who want to change school rules may need some support in following the procedures to get those rules changed. Also, simply knowing that students feel so strongly about the freedom and choice they have in these schools is often valuable for staff members.

Clear trends existed in the answers to every question asked. With a sampling size of 23 students, similar answers from even five students are significant, as they represent 22% of the sampled population. When asked what they would change about their schools, students answered rules, aesthetics, noise levels, and “nothing.” Changing rules is well within the limits of what is not only accepted but expected at Sudbury model schools. Aesthetics are also easy to change, when students go through the proper channels. It is unfortunate that the noise levels are much more difficult to change. However, the overall indication is that 21 of the 23 students surveyed essentially said that they wanted to change either nothing, or something that they have the power to change. By reminding these students of the powers that they have, their satisfaction could be increased.

There are obvious limits to this study, namely the small sample size and the personal opinions that carry a significant bias. By no means does this study attempt to prove that all students who experience freedom and choice in their learning environments are happy and satisfied. However, this study does begin to point to the overall experience of students in this type of environment. Since very little research has been done in this area, this study sets out to begin to prove the effectiveness of such an educational style.

There are several research projects that could build from this one. First, it would be useful to conduct a study that compared a similar group of students in traditional classrooms with the results from this study. Originally that was the intent of this project, but due to several factors that goal was not attainable. By having students in a traditional classroom complete the questionnaire used in this study a comparative analysis could be performed. Second, it would be interesting to survey a larger body of students, both from other Sudbury model schools and unschooling households. Children who are schooled at home, particularly unschooled children, may be one of the least researched populations in the country. Using this questionnaire with a broader range of children would give the overall results more validity. A third potential research project could be to use the questionnaire with similar age groups in two different, randomly selected Sudbury model schools. By doing so, it would be possible to see if the results generated were consistent with the original findings. This would also give validity to the original study's results. Obviously there would be some differences, as the results are based on opinions, but a similar, consistent result could be noted.

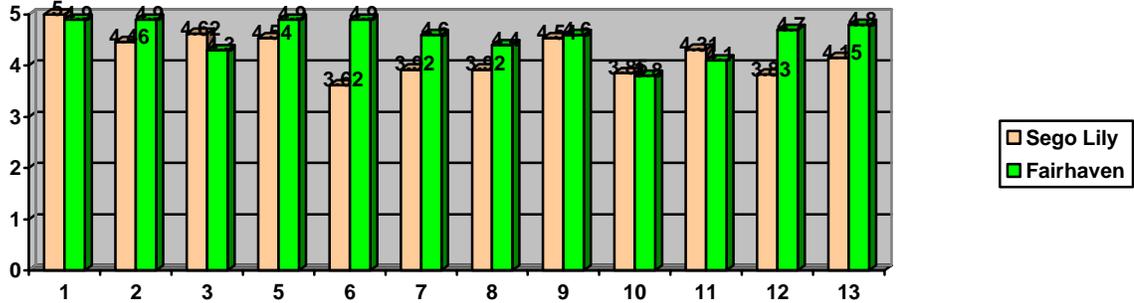
The results of this study are intended to be a springboard for future research. There is a definite need for more research in the area of self-directed learning, whether in Sudbury model schools, unschooling households, or in combination with traditional educational practices. It is

the intent of this researcher to continue to engage in the questions posed by this study, as well as many others, in order to validate the experiences of the many graduates of the Sudbury model schools around the world, as well as present and future students.

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Figure 1: Average answers to scaled questions, by school



Questions (Averages are color coded similar to chart after each question for ease of reference)

- 1. I like school. 5.0 4.9
- 2. School is fun for me. 4.46 4.9
- 3. I want to go to school in the mornings. 4.62 4.3
- 5. I have friends at school. 4.54 4.9
- 6. I get to spend time with my friends while at school. 3.62 4.9
- 7. I study things I enjoy at school. 3.92 4.6
- 8. I like the teachers/staff members at my school. 3.92 4.4
- 9. My teachers/staff members like me. 4.54 4.6
- 10. My teachers/staff members know a lot about me. 3.85 3.8
- 11. My teachers/staff members know what is important to me. 4.31 4.1
- 12. My teachers/staff members support my interests. 3.83 4.7
- 13. My friends and I find interesting ways to spend our time at school. 4.15 4.8

Table 1: Student Opinion Scores (SOS)

The following tables show the average of the answers given by each student to the twelve scaled questions (labeled “SOS”). Scores are reported by age, and are arranged by school.

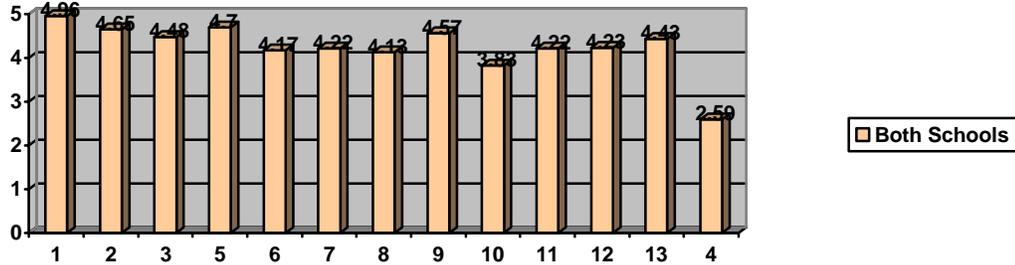
Sego Lily School

Student #	Age	Gender	SOS
1	4	F	4.09
2	5	M	5
3	5	F	3.12
4	6	M	4.83
5	7	M	4.17
6	7	M	3.5
7	7	M	4.67
8	8	F	3.75
9	8	M	4.67
10	8	F	3.75
11	9	F	3.75
12	12	M	4.33
13	16	F	4.33

Fairhaven School

Student #	Age	Gender	SOS
1	5	M	4.92
2	5	F	4.92
3	7	F	4.75
4	9	F	4.5
5	9	F	4.25
6	9	F	5
7	10	F	4.75
8	12	F	4.42
9	12	F	4.58
10	12	M	3.83

Figure 2: Average answers to scaled questions, combined both schools



1. I like school.
2. School is fun for me.
3. I want to go to school in the mornings.
5. I have friends at school.
6. I get to spend time with my friends while at school.
7. I study things I enjoy at school.
8. I like the teachers/staff members at my school.
9. My teachers/staff members like me.
10. My teachers/staff members know a lot about me.
11. My teachers/staff members know what is important to me.
12. My teachers/staff members support my interests.
13. My friends and I find interesting ways to spend our time at school.
4. I can't wait to leave school at the end of the day. (This question was designed to elicit a negative answer)

Appendix A

Students' Attitude Questionnaire

***Note to persons administering this survey:

For younger students, it is OK to use a 1-3 scale, indicating like, don't like, or neutral. Simply note that you are using that scale and have the child circle 1, 2, or 3 for each answer, eliminating the 4 & 5 on each line. It is OK to read the survey to the children, as well as to write the answers for them if needed. Please be sure to write narrative answers exactly as they are spoken.

Please answer each question by circling one number under the question. In each case the scale is represented like this:

1	2	3	4	5
I Do Not Agree At All	I Mostly Don't Agree	Neutral	I Agree A Little	I Agree Completely

For example, if the statement was "I like Pizza", and you LOVE pizza, you would circle 5. If you HATE pizza, circle 1. If you don't really care about pizza either way, circle 3.

- | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I like school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | |
| 2. School is fun for me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | |
| 3. I want to go to school in the mornings. | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I can't wait to leave school at the end of the day. | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. I have friends at school. | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | |
| 6. I get to spend time with my friends while at school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | |
| 7. I study things I enjoy at school. | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | |
| 8. I like the teachers/staff members at my school. | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. My teachers/staff members like me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | |
| 10. My teachers/staff members know a lot about me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | | |
| 11. My teachers/staff members know what is important to me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | | |
| | 5 | | | | | | | |
| 12. My teachers/staff members support my interests. | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | |
| 13. My friends and I find interesting ways to spend our time at school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | | | | | |
| | 4 | 5 | | | | | | |

For the next part, please answer the questions in your own words. It is OK to have someone write down your answers if you need help. The answers do not need to be long, but feel free to provide as much information as you would like.

1. What is your favorite thing about school?
2. What is one thing you would change about your school if you could?
3. Why do you like school? OR, if you don't like school, why not?

4. What is your favorite thing to learn about? Do you get to spend time learning about that in school?
5. What is your favorite thing about the teachers/staff members you know at school? What is your least favorite thing?
6. Do you spend time with your friends at school? If yes, what do you like to do with them?