

The Secret Weapon

by Michael Sappir

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Sudbury schools operate on a simple concept: people are free to govern their own lives and direct their own learning, limited only by the school's self-governing democracy. But what allows these schools to be such effective, vibrant and dynamic learning communities? What causes people to acquire valuable skills and information? What enables everybody to get along? The answer, and the secret weapon of democratic schools, lies in free communication.

Me

My name is Michael Sappir. I grew up in Jerusalem, Israel, and although I got along well with my teachers, I was unhappy in elementary and middle school – until my mother and I heard about the Sudbury startup group friends of our family were starting. We both participated in starting the first democratic school in Jerusalem, now known as Sudbury Jerusalem. In my four years as a student at Sudbury Jerusalem, I was deeply involved in running and managing the school, and I was regularly involved in the school's PR until I moved to Germany last September.

My school

Today, Sudbury Jerusalem – where my sister is about to graduate and my brother still happily goes every day – is in its sixth school year. Over eighty students are enrolled at the school, which moved to a new, bigger building this past summer to allow room for more students to join. The school is still growing, and if I were to name the precise number of students currently enrolled it might no longer be correct when this article goes to print. The school is not yet recognized by Israeli authorities, although the matter is subject to a legal battle, started in the school's first year.

Idle chatter

Since I graduated, I have been at the school to visit on a few occasions, sometimes for whole school days at a time. Whenever I visit SJ – or any other Sudbury school for that matter – I am struck by the huge amount of communication going on all around me. Free to go where they want and do what they want without interruption or intervention, people are constantly in motion throughout the large school house, and wherever you look you will find people communicating. In the kitchen, a few teenagers – the very group I belonged to not so long ago – are lounging about, gossiping vigorously, ironically complaining of lack of free time or having heated political discussions. Elsewhere my little brother, 11, is playing some newly-invented game with a few other kids – some as

young as 6, some perhaps 12 or 13. The arguments about the rules of the game can be heard across the yard. In the school office, the Secretary of the School Meeting is working on the next Meeting's agenda while absentmindedly talking with a friend about her plans for the weekend. Both of them are members of the school's staff. When a young child runs in asking frantically to help her write something, the Secretary keeps typing and her colleague grabs a pen and leaves with the girl.

What the little ones taught me

I consider free communication to be the lifeblood of a healthy Sudbury school. Staff members do not impose their wishes and expectations upon students – students are expected to turn to staff whenever they need them. Many students require staff assistance far less than one might expect. Often, younger students rely on the assistance of older students – many of whom are remarkably glad to help their younger peers. I'm personally grateful for the chance I had to interact with small children. I was in charge of the school's computers for almost four years, and I often had to explain the complicated rules relating to the computers to those not yet familiar with them. Often as not, my audience was half my age. To clearly explain things to young children, I had to learn to formulate my thoughts more simply and directly, and to speak in a way that is easier to understand. This has turned out to be a valuable lesson for me: it improved my writing, it improved my speaking, it clarified my thinking and it made my argumentation versatile and flexible. I'll be the first to admit I was not always thrilled to have the little ones seeking me out to ask me questions or ask me for help, but I learned to be patient. I owe my little peers quite a lot, for the lessons I learned from them. These would not have been possible without the environment of free communication, and more than just being a boon to me, these interactions allowed the school to function as it does.

Morning in the living-room

Communication is the key to the way learning works in Sudbury schools. What I learned from the younger students is not a unique experience of mine, and it is not rare or unusual. Spontaneous communication seems to spark learning. I have many fond memories in the living-room, the heart of the schoolhouse. Almost every morning, a handful of students and a staff member or two would sleepily settle down on the living-room's many couches and sofas. Usually a few of them would have gotten their hands on various sections of the daily newspaper, and there was almost always somebody hugging a warm mug of coffee, trying to wake up. Many times, that was me. The living-room was often full of heated discussions. Politics, always the focal point of conflicting passions in Israel, were not a rare topic. Anything could come up, and half an hour could easily see five different topics come and go. Sometimes, a topic would have its run and be forgotten. Other times, the discussion could keep going on and off for weeks, whenever the chance presented itself. And many a time, thoughts that started in a sleepy morning discussion in the living-room would wax and grow

into something greater later on – a search full of discoveries on Wikipedia, an ambitious project, a proposal for a new School Law – I cannot truly list all the different kinds of things that grew out of these conversations. In a way, these living-room discussions were a world of their own, but they are just one small example of the kinds of communication one may find in a Sudbury school. The freedom to speak to whomever I want, whenever I wish, about whatever I care to talk about, is nothing short of an endless source of learning. And when such idle conversation is allowed to run its course uninterrupted, it can lead to surprisingly deep and serious discussions – discussions which often lead to expanded horizons and new areas of interest.

Freedom, *de facto*

The freedom students enjoy to not only talk about whatever they want, but to actually undertake any project that interests them, is one of the key reasons that free communication is possible in Sudbury schools. It is especially important for deep discussions like the ones I described above. To understand this, one must understand the way this freedom works: it is not a mere technicality. Students are actually expected to choose whatever they want to do – not just to choose what others expect them to do. A Physics class in a Sudbury school is no more important than a soccer game. If I liked soccer, I could play soccer every day, all day, and I would not get dirty looks from the staff or from my peers. I personally do not like soccer, but two areas that have always captured my imagination and fascinated me are languages and games – more specifically, the structure and evolution of languages, and the design and production of all kinds of games. Over my years at Sudbury Jerusalem I worked on about five or six different projects related to game design and linguistics (usually separately from one another). At first glance, almost every one of these projects was an utter waste of time. Not one of them has produced a final product, to date. When I decided to try and create a phonetic alphabet for my native language – American English – I was very excited for about three days, until I realized this project was utterly impossible. I must have invested at least ten or fifteen hours of concentrated work over those three days, both at home and at school. Sure, some people gave me funny looks, some friends asked me what the point was, but I was having fun so I kept on going. When I realized that a single phonetic alphabet could at best capture only one person's pronunciation of the language, I stopped. Looking back now, I'm surprised how much that project actually taught me. Beyond the obvious lesson – that English is not a language to be written phonetically – I learned a great deal about phonetics, about the English language, and about figuring out problems. And these seemingly pointless projects did not cause anyone to ostracize me or to take me less seriously. The knowledge that I was free at any moment to go off and get knee-deep in whatever we were talking about, allowed me to engage in deep, meaningful discussions. Nobody in the school tried to stop me. Nothing was arbitrarily determined to be more important than whatever we were talking about. I was free to ask, discuss and argue until my interest was satisfied – or until

whoever I was arguing with got sick of it and left.

My friends, the staff

Staff and students communicate with one another just as freely as students do amongst themselves. This is remarkable and very important to the whole dynamic of free communication in Sudbury schools. One co-founder and staff member at Sudbury Jerusalem often proudly proclaims to newcomers, “we have no Staff Room – we have no need to escape from the children. We love children!”, and this is evident in the school's everyday life. Staff members are hired as a resource for the school, to be available to students. When they aren't too busy, staff spend their time just like the students, sitting around, hanging out, resting, talking. And they never try and get away from the students. Many children prefer to do things on their own, to be independent. In many ways I was like that. But whenever I had a difficult decision before me, whenever something really excited me, whenever I needed to talk, I knew the staff was there for me, open to my questions and ready to listen and to help. I still consider those staff members friends of mine – both those who were there from the start, with whom I shared the experience of starting the school, and those we hired later on. While founding the school, I learned to see them as my peers; but the manner in which they treated me honestly and equally was never unusual at school. I saw how they adopted the very same approach towards other students of all ages. In time I grew to trust the staff's openness and honesty, and the fact that they never wanted to judge me. This meant, first of all, that I was not afraid to turn to them, and second of all, that I really listened to whatever they said. It wasn't “just some teacher” talking to me – it was my friend. Their honest remarks have stayed with me unlike anything I remember of the teachers in the other schools I attended. Each and every one of them was an educator to me, in the truest sense of the word. I was given the opportunity to see them, communicate with them, get to know them as real, functioning, adult human beings. This taught me more than any class or lecture could.

In summary

It has long been clear to me that I want to help Sudbury schools and to promote them, and that when the time comes I will not settle for any other kind of school for my own children. I believe all children should enjoy the same freedom of self-determination that I had at Sudbury Jerusalem, the freedom that all adults enjoy. I found a vital component of this freedom is an environment that allows one to talk with whomever one wants, about whatever strikes their fancy, whenever is convenient to them. Another is the time and possibility to not only discuss ideas but pursue them. It grows clearer to me with time that free communication is a key enabler of freedom, and a source of empowerment. I hope one day, environments like Sudbury Jerusalem will be commonplace and everyone will have the opportunity to enjoy their benefits.