

What school could...

Sonika Lakhera



Because of
you I moved
on from what
to how and
finally why

Imagine if you were a child again, and if you could spend the better part of your day, every day, doing things you really cared about. Like climbing trees, or listening to a story being read out by an older friend. Like thinking about a difficult math problem, or learning how to take photographs, or playing chess. Like studying that chapter on magnetic forces again, or practising the piano...

Imagine if you were a child again, and if you could decide when and how you wanted to do something, anything. Like when you wanted to start figuring out what 'addition' was all about, or start recognizing those wriggly black marks as 'letters' and 'words'. Like how you wanted to learn wood carving by apprenticing with an artisan, or practise those algebraic equations for days on end, all by yourself, till you felt sure that you were finally getting them, or bend over your painting for hours together, just to get that perfect shade of gold...

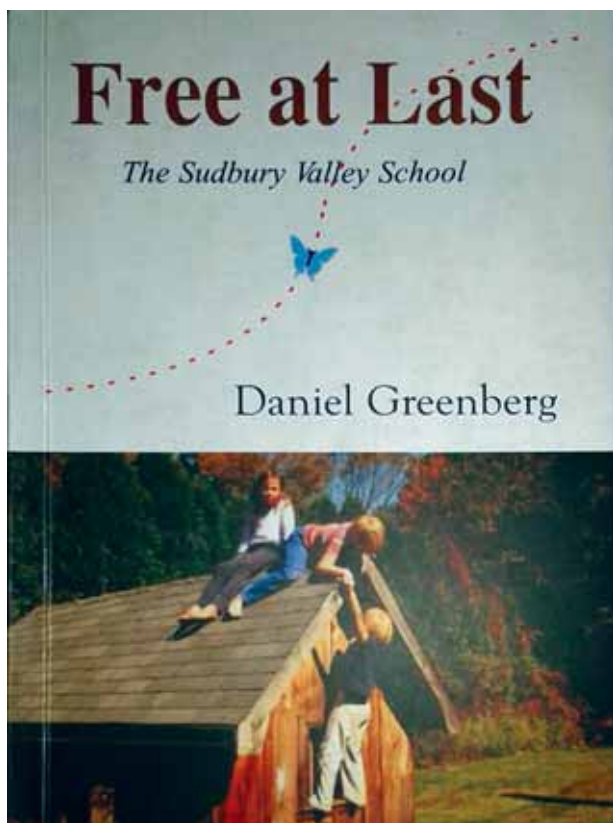
Imagine if you were a child again and if you could decide how to keep the lunch hours flexible, whom you could learn history from, what should happen if someone dirties the walls, if any new footballs needed to be bought, who should teach physics next year, where should the old cupboard be placed, how can books be shared more responsibly...

Imagine if you were a child again, and you could do all this in a place called 'school'.

Well, if you really were a child again and if you happened to be a part of the 'Sudbury Valley School' at Framingham, USA, you would, in all likelihood, be doing all of this and more.

The 'Sudbury Valley School' (<http://www.sudval.org/>) was started in 1968 by a group of parents who could not find a good enough school for their children. Over time, this school has developed into a democratic space where the children have a say in all matters relating to the school and are given the utmost opportunity to direct their own learning.

The school basically runs on the belief that children know best what is good for them, and therefore, should be given the chance to follow their instincts. Our role, as adults, should only be to encourage and guide them as required. They believe very simply that every child will eventually learn whatever she really needs to learn in order to find her place in this world, and happily so, if we can just let her progress in her own unique way, at her own unique pace. If we can just "let her be".



Allowed to develop in this way, she will, in a most natural manner, learn to balance freedom with responsibility. She will develop a strong sense of identity, dignity, confidence, and accountability. Qualities, which will enable her, above all, to depend on herself under any circumstances. Qualities, which will enable her also to be caring, respectful, and supportive of others.

The school has no fixed courses, no real syllabus, no grades, no common time-table, no grade-level requirements, no age/gender-discrimination when it comes to learning/doing anything in groups (so, a group could be learning arithmetic, and have a 9 year old and a 12 year old together), not even any kind-of tenure for teachers – they have to be voted in by the entire school community (including the children) to be kept on the staff team each academic year.

Interested in the book?

For your own copy of this remarkable book, visit the following websites:

Eklavya Pitara

<http://www eklavya.in/pitara/index.php?route=common/home>

Banyan Tree

<http://banyantreebookstore.weebly.com/>

Other India Bookstore

<http://www.otherindiabookstore.com/index.jsp>

None of this means that there is any indiscipline or chaos. In fact, the school has very deeply thought-out and detailed ways of ensuring “liberty and justice for all”. Ways, which basically lay the onus on the individual to contribute responsibly to both her own growth and the sustenance of the school atmosphere. And she does, they all do, helped along by the “two distinct and mutually complementary emotions of ease and care, hallmarks of Sudbury Valley.”

Today, there are quite a few Sudbury schools around the world which try to provide a similar free and democratic learning environment inspired by the initial effort.

The book *Free at Last, The Sudbury Valley School*, written by one of the founding members of the school, Daniel Greenberg, helps us “see” and “feel” what this school is all about.

For anyone, who has even for the briefest moment, experienced a sense of dissonance with our more conventional educational practices, this book, is a must-read.

The author is based in Mumbai and works with children in the primary grades. She can be reached at < sonika.lakhera@gmail.com > .