

Starri Hedges

Free Schools: Healing and Learning Through the Practice of Freedom

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Abstract

Freedom is a powerful healing force and can be used to dramatically enhance educational environments. This position paper explores defining characteristics and examples of free schools, focusing closely on how freedom--and free schools--heal students. Specific health concerns, including Attention Deficit Disorder, are addressed. Connections between holistic health and education are discussed, including ways that free school philosophies and practices can respond to specific holistic health needs. Various aspects of the relationship between freedom and learning are outlined, building support for the idea that free schools help create a healthy democratic society by encouraging student involvement, choice, and personal responsibility.

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Free Schools: Healing and Learning Through the Practice of Freedom

The most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.--Erik Erikson

History: My Story

I have worked at a free school for 17 years, and I love my job. I don't get paid as well as a "normal" teacher, but I am not expected to be "normal" either. I am a passionate advocate for academic freedom and democracy in schools. Partly because it happened to me, I believe that many educational institutions damage young people's lives by restricting students' natural creativity, curiosity, and rights to freedom. The damage this can cause to child and adolescent development is significant. Through my experiences as a student and teacher, I have become deeply committed to finding ways to help foster healing through the practice of freedom in schools. What ten years of school systems--elementary and secondary, Catholic and public, urban and rural--taught me most of all was to hate school. Unfortunately, children hating school is so common, it is considered normal. I think that ignoring such a serious sign is dangerous. Spending 30 hours a week somewhere you hate is simply not healthy.

In the Beginning

I grew up in the country. The woods and meadows were my classrooms; plants and animals were my teachers. I don't remember learning that I was a person with a right to be respected--I just knew. In kindergarten, my teacher turned water into wine and told us that Jesus performed magic. I was amazed. From there, school went steeply downhill. At first, boredom was the single worst aspect. Over time, the plot thickened, but the boredom never went away.

In third grade, Sister Mary Agnes attacked Deanna R. Deanna was left cut and bleeding from our teacher's long, sharp nails. Unfortunately, that was not the only attack Deanna endured under Sister Mary Agnes' rule. I felt powerless to do anything about it.

In fifth grade, Sister Mary Margaret screamed and threw a garbage can at me because I left a book on my desk during lunch. These kinds of lessons, day in and day out, took their toll. I had to escape St. Patrick's Catholic School after the garbage can incident. Looking back, I am appalled by the abuse and the anti-Semitic, anti-choice, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-everything else I believe in propaganda that we were taught. Little did I know, the worst was yet to come.

School Made Me Sick

I started seriously hating school in junior high; it was like a nightmare for me. Once, a male teacher knocked me down and dragged me to the door. The academic work was boring and tedious. I also started getting migraine headaches, which became my biggest health problem for the next several years. Like many physical issues that young people face, my headaches were probably a manifestation of having to conform to an unhealthy system of education. Knaster (1996) wrote, that because of "having to sit still in a desk . . . we develop painful body conditions, we become alienated from our bodies after spending hours all week confined" (pp. 36-37). My experiences as a student and as a teacher have convinced me that school systems play a much bigger causal role in illness and disease than most people realize, including health and education specialists.

Eventually, I became so depressed at the thought of continuing my twelve year long prison sentence that I was severely suicidal and spent many hours skipping classes. When I could not escape the building, I often locked myself in the girls bathroom and cut myself with razor blades. My mother battled every morning, literally dragging me kicking and screaming, trying to

force me to go to a building that made me--on all levels--sick. Humiliating conditions were the norm at every school that I can remember, until I discovered the free school that saved my life.

Second Foundation: Lifesaver

In 1986, my mother (at her wits ends with me and the public school system) brought me to a funky, art-covered basement in a yellow stone church rented in Dinkytown, Minneapolis. I had never heard of Summerhill (Neil, 1992) and didn't understand the philosophy or methods of this strange new "summerhillian" school, but that didn't matter. Freedom is not always the kind of magic that must be believed in to work.

Second Foundation School (SFS), founded in 1970, became the best thing to ever happen to me. It wasn't the teachers, curriculum, or facilities that made it so much better than any other school. It was one simple thing that SFS provided. It healed my hatred for learning and schooling. It also happened to be the one thing that I needed the most-- freedom.

Freedom is one of the most powerful healing forces I have ever experienced. As a teenager suffering poor mental and physical health, the freedom that I enjoyed in a free school environment offered me a chance to learn to love learning again. Because of this, and many, many experiences as a free school teacher and as a parent, I believe that freedom is directly related to healing and learning.

Freedom: Healing Force

Freedom is a healing force. It can heal the mind, body, and spirit as well as the past, present, and future. The power of freedom can transform individual lives and societies. Freedom can also prevent problems from developing. Schools can be a place for healing if they value freedom. Free schools offer a vision of how holistic theories on health and education can blend to create an environment of healing through the practice of freedom. Through this freedom, youth can facilitate deep transformation and empowerment for the purposes of both healing and learning.

A fundamental premise for my position is that learning happens best when people have full mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom. The more freedom that we experience, the more that we can come to know our own selves--including our thoughts, feelings, and natural instincts (Kohn, 2004). Knowing our own selves enables us to follow our inner wisdom and intuitions about what is best for us in any given moment. The freedom to follow our own true selves allows us to figure out our unique path in the world. Through this freedom, we can learn our challenges, strengths, passions, and goals. We can learn these things in a natural way, through internally motivated curiosity. When children are allowed time and space to explore in freedom, learning happens easily.

Ethic of Social Responsibility

Freedom helps build healthy democratic societies. Free schools contribute to a better society and world by promoting inner authority and discipline, valuing equality and democratic process, and encouraging active community participation and positive self-image. Working towards an educational model that is freedom-based directly impacts the larger society by positively influencing individual students, parents, and communities. Free schools also foster life long learning, which enriches society in many ways over the short and long terms.

Freedom: Free School Style

Freedom means different things to different people. According to the *American Heritage*

Dictionary definition, freedom is defined as:

1. The condition of being free of restraint. 2. Liberty from slavery, detention, or oppression.

3a. Political independence. 3b. Possession of civil rights, immunity from the arbitrary exercise

of authority. 4. Exemption from an unpleasant or onerous condition. 5. The capacity to exercise choice; free will. (p. 542)

Of the first five entries, young people are guaranteed none of the above. This is highly problematic because freedom is the key to creating healing and learning environments for youth. Non-free schools, which are too often run like prisons, make many of our children sick.

Neill (1992) wrote on the differences between freedom and license, an important distinction (pp. 27-28). He also told us that “Freedom works!” (p. 23), and then added, “freedom works best with those that have enough combined free emotion and free intelligence to absorb it” (62). Mintz (2003) also commented on freedom versus license. He explained that “you have the freedom to do certain things up to the point at which you’re interfering with somebody else’s freedom” (p. 32). At SFS, the distinction between freedom and license comes up on a regular basis in the forms of music versus quiet study space, candy wrappers left on the floor, or throwing balls throughout the school. Mintz wrote about how hard it can be for adults who were themselves disempowered as youth to trust freedom and suggested that the constant repetition of this cycle is the biggest barrier towards practicing freedom in schools (pp. 13--14).

What is a free school?

Free schools practice academic freedom and participatory democracy. According to Miller (2002), they offer students “the freedom to learn, to play, to make decisions, and to think for themselves” (p. 4). There are, as Galley (2004) stated, “no bells, no required reading, and no detention” (para. 3) and, as Mintz (2003) made clear, “no uniform rows of desks with passive, obedient children waiting for their empty heads to be filled with knowledge” (p. 63). Students have freedom of thought and movement, and are, as Neill (1992) wrote, “free to learn at their own pace, and in their own ways” (p.13). Equating children’s freedom to societal freedom, Neill asked, “Free to be what? Themselves without hate and fear and authoritarianism” (p. 236).

Neill’s Summerhill School in England is the oldest, continually-running school in the modern movement and has served as an inspiration for other free schools worldwide. Summerhill was radically different from other boarding schools of the same time period. Neill (1992) was raised in an oppressive and restrictive educational environment, and he worked as a teacher in state schools where students were regularly beaten. In 1921, Neill founded Summerhill to create a school that was on the side of the student, valuing “self-government . . . and freedom--to go to lessons or stay away, freedom to play for days or weeks or years if necessary, freedom from any indoctrination” (p. 3). Neill believed that “schools should conform to the child, not the other way around” (p. 9).

Each free school is independent and as unique as each person is. Appleton (2000) indirectly makes this point in his statement that “there is, in fact, no great theory that shapes Summerhill; it shapes itself around the practical and emotional needs of the children and adults that live there at any one time” (p. 2). However, there are several similarities found among different free schools when looking at them as part of a larger educational movement that is

connected through a deep belief in freedom. Free schools share many characteristics in common, including the following common traits.

Free Schools are Democratically Run

Free schools use democratic meetings to run the school and solve problems. Although there are variations on the “School Meetings” in different schools, they are always present in some form (Miller, 2002; Mintz, 2003). Because free schools are small, usually numbering between 20-80 students, they can practice direct participatory democracy more easily than larger schools. Students, staff, and sometimes parents, are considered equal and each person gets one vote on decisions concerning all aspects of the school. Format, facilitation, and issues such as whether or not to mandate attendance at meetings vary between different schools. Some students, such as those at Sudbury Valley, can vote to hire and fire teachers, while those matters are handled by staff at other free schools, such as Summerhill.

Free Schools Practice Non-compulsory Learning

Academic lessons are non-compulsory at free schools and free schools don’t subscribe to or advocate a specific curriculum (Mintz, 2003). To free school advocates such as Neill (1992), “it is not the teaching materials or even the subject matters that are the problem, but the freedom to pick what works best” (p. 78). Bouklas (2004) stressed the importance of maintaining a sense of adventure in learning. He acknowledged that “a series of educational adventures, facilitated in a healing environment, will lead to greater skills, knowledge and understanding than any canned curriculum” (p. 95). The current push for increased standardization in this country is strong, but it is wrong. It goes against what most teachers and students know intuitively, that teaching for the test is dull work for all involved (Kohn, 1999).

After calling adults “generally unimaginative,” free school advocate Gribble (2003) asked, “How could anyone seriously put forth the idea that every child in this country needs to cover the same curriculum?” (p. 8). As one free school teacher quoted by Gribble said, “it’s like we have 50 different curriculums here” (p. 8). Operating from the premise that each student is unique, free schools do not attempt to make everyone follow the same recipe for success.

The non-compulsory nature of free schools is a cornerstone of all philosophies and practices. At SFS, we have an open attendance policy, which means that the only students I teach in classes are there willingly. They are also free to leave. I consider myself blessed as a teacher because shoving meaningless information down uninterested throats sounds horrible to me, and I never have to do that. Based on the belief that an interested mind will absorb more learning, non-compulsory education requires students to actively choose their own levels of participation and paths of learning.

Free Schools Practice Age Mixing

One of the most important beliefs underlying free school philosophy is that each person is a unique individual. This means that it is considered normal when something works for one person and not another, an idea explored in theories of multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 1994). It also means that students will learn things at different times and that age is not the biggest factor in deciding on a course of study.

Some free schools are only open to certain aged students, but there is always less focus on age than in other schools. Children learn mastery of different skills and knowledge at different times in their lives and free schools accept that. Free school educators do not panic if a student

does not start reading until they are 10 years old. Children may walk or talk at different ages and no one seems to find cause for highly structured training in those areas.

In most schools, a 6 year old who isn't reading is usually slapped with a (potentially) life-long "special" education label. Many students may develop a large vocabulary and a strong ability for comprehension without mastering all reading skills. At a free school, people are not labeled "special" for learning in their own way; in fact, they are not labeled at all.

At SFS, my youngest student is 4 years old and my oldest is 21. Everyone is equally important to the school community. We allow and encourage students to interact with a wide age range and there are often beautiful friendships formed between students many grades apart. Through involvement with a multi-age group, all of us learn to watch out for each other and to see things from multiple points of view. Older students help mediate conflicts between younger students, as well as helping them learn academic skills. Younger students often help enforce rules and teach older kids lessons about child development and patience.

Holistic Education, Holistic Healing

Hate and punishment never cured anything, only love can cure.--A.S. Neill

There are exciting connections between ideas and practices found in both holistic health and holistic education. These connections can, and should, be strengthened. They can teach us important lessons about human nature and how to solve many of the problems that we encounter in our schools, personal lives, and larger communities.

Holistic Perspective

Applying holistic theory is the key to supporting and understanding the interrelationship between healing and learning. Thinking holistically means honoring all aspects of a person's being and the interconnectedness of these aspects. Knaster (1996) described the holistic view of health as knowing that "every part of your body and every aspect of your being is connected and affects every other part" (p. 101). Miller (2000) defined holistic education as "an attempt to return to the mysterious source of human creativity and authenticity for fresh inspiration" (p. 2). Miller goes on to state that the goal of holistic education is to "enable the wholeness of the human being to emerge and develop as fully as possible" (p. 2).

Holistic concepts are essential to apply to both health and education if we are to raise happy, healthy children. Mercogliano (2003) stated that "anger and rage often accompany fear in the psyche" (p. 41) and showed how these emotions limit the ability to learn. Brain-based researchers, including Caine (1991) and Fogarty (2002), also associated these strong emotions with negative blocks to learning. Yet most schools are poisoned with fear.

Free schools are naturally holistic because, unlike most schools, they recognize the relationship of a student's intellectual growth to their mental, physical, and emotional well being. Neill (1992) believed that "learning in itself is not as important as personality and character" (p. 10) and that "emotions are infinitely more powerful and vital than the intellect" (p. 209). Happiness itself as the key to good health according to Neill (p. 73). This core belief manifests in the unique, caring atmosphere that Summerhill and other free schools create.

Both health and education work with living, growing human brains and bodies--not machines or robots. Holt (1983) claimed that the popular comparison of children to machines is one of the most "mistaken, foolish, harmful, dangerous, and evil ideas of all" (p. 11). Gatto (2006) traced the history of how young people have come to be viewed as mechanistic clean

slates and the effects of this belief on the evolution of U.S. schools. The fact that we are all unique beings, with brains as different from each other as our finger prints (Fogarty, 2002) makes differentiation necessary. Many educators agree that standardization is an unrealistic and potentially harmful goal (Kohn, 1999). Free schools focus on the entire person and recognize each individual student as a unique and important part of the community.

Free schools work holistically because of intrinsic desire for knowledge and internal motivation. Lin (2001), wrote that “no one can help us heal unless we want to heal” (p. 52). This idea can easily be applied to various aspects of education, including the free school belief in non-compulsory studies. Many holistic educators believe that a person learns best (or only) when interested. Forcing someone’s personal process against their will is not in accordance with an education that values freedom. Bouklas (2004) warned that “when you come at the child with stimulation out of synchrony with his developmental needs, you force the ossification of his mental and emotional states” (p. 63).

Health and education can each be radically improved if we adopt holistic views. Looking at our selves and our children holistically, we begin to see how interconnected these two different areas really are. Children’s health affects their learning and vice versa. It’s as simple as that. Any parent or teacher that is paying attention can see that clearly.

From a holistic perspective, a priority is to work towards making schools healthier and making health settings more educational. Knaster (1996), wrote on the subject of holistic healing and defined the goal of all education as “to draw out self-knowledge and self-control through conscious awareness” (p. xv). She advocates working with the body to “get an education that teaches not by rote, but by examining and experiencing with your whole being” (p. xix). In these ways, and many more, holistic health and education can work together to enhance both learning and healing.

Equality, Not Authority

Holistic education and holistic healing share many core principles. Some examples are that they both require patient/student equality, autonomy, and personal responsibility. In many cultures, shamans have served as healers and teachers combined. Similar to traditional shamans because of their connections to healing and learning., holistic health practitioners and holistic teachers are seen as guides, not as the all-knowing, expert, God kings of power and knowledge. This point is made clear by examining some holistic definitions of both teachers and healers. Bouklas (2004) described ideal teachers as “facilitators” and defined facilitating as “releasing children to move freely” (p. 10) and “understanding what happens, helping the child talk it out, and encouraging that energy to flow in a creative direction” (p. 11). Often just asking for a child’s input is enough to generate a solution. Mintz (2003) wrote that the most important qualities in a free school teacher are “the ability to work through things and to have the inherent instincts to listen to kids and interact in a democratic community” (p. 129). These ideas of teachers are in complete contrast to the typical authoritarian dispenser of information image we are familiar with.

Similarly, Lin (2000) described the role of holistic healers as “helpers to make healing happen” (p. 52). He claimed that his style of Qigong healing was simply “awakening the natural healing ability that everyone has within themselves” (p. 91). The idea of each person having the innate ability to learn or heal by themselves is compatible with free school philosophy, which

directly counters other major beliefs regarding education. In free schools, students have the power to meet their own needs and can be their own authorities.

Free school teachers are considered helpers or guides in the process of learning and, like healers, they are equal partners in the encounter. They are not hired to be experts or authority figures. The learning process, like healing, belongs more to the individual undergoing transformation (the student) than to the guide.

Neill (1992) commented often on his relationship to students as a free school teacher. Neill wrote, "I am no authority to be feared, I am their equal" (p. 13) He clearly did not believe in fear based education, which he claimed leads to a "deep fear of life" (p. 3). Neill did, however, believe in adults being "real" with young people. To Neill, being equal did not mean that the adults (a minority) had no rights in the democratic environment, but that they must be willing to be honest, equal, and genuine in their participation without using their status as adults to invoke fear. They must also attempt to not impose their own agenda or judgments over the power of the school councils (p.11-12).

How Free Schools Heal

While free schools were not started with the intention of healing "problem students," they do so naturally by their holistic nature. Neill (1992) pointed out that "Many children come to Summerhill with emotional problems and go away whole and strong" (xxiii). Other free schools have also found much success with "problem" children (Miller, 2002; Mercogliano, 2003). It isn't even necessarily the schools, it is the freedom itself that heals.

Freedom is one of the main ingredients missing in U.S. public school systems. The results of this deficiency have serious effects on our children's physical, mental, and emotional health. The main reason that free schools effectively provide a healing environment for young people is simply the amount of freedom present. Neill (1992) strongly believed that "all crimes, all hatreds and all wars can be reduced to unhappiness" (p. 7) but that through freedom, "children's unhappiness is cured" (p. 7). In this way, free schools work to heal individuals and communities. Learning in a setting that encourages feelings of happiness, freedom, and liberty helps promote holistic wellbeing and helps the brain to function at its best.

According to brain based educational research, the human brain responds best to new information when it is in a state of relaxation and focus (Fogarty, 2002). Maximum ability to learn happens when the brain is relaxed yet alert (Caine, 1991). Desire to learn often produces that exact state, without the use of drugs or coercion. Free schools are far more "relaxed" than most schools and encourage positive feelings towards learning.

The mind state that is recommended for optimal learning by brain based research is comparable to what Buddhists have termed "mindfulness." It is cultivated through meditation and other body/mind awareness techniques (Miller, 2002). Free schools can enhance their students' lives through body/mindful practices. At SFS, we have had great experiences with lessons in subjects such as yoga, reiki, and meditation. Specific examples of holistic health practices in free school settings--and "normal" public schools too--have had excellent results.

A small amount of stress--such as that created by the natural curiosity to learn the mystery of how something works--is good for the brain, but stress in general actually damages the brain (Caine, 1991). This is especially obvious when the stressors happen repeatedly during major developmental periods in childhood. Many psychological studies on child abuse, neglect,

and other factors that affect development have shown the causal relationship between trauma, stress, and brain development (Jensen, 1998). Studies have also shown a strong correlation between family stress factors and the diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Mercogliano, 2003). An often ignored fact is that school systems themselves promote and evoke high stress levels.

Play and Freedom of Movement Heals

Another healing aspect of free schools is the abundance of play that goes on. If you offer kids free choice, they often choose to play. As Neill (1960) insightfully analyzed, there are all sorts of kinds of play (pp. 32-36). Play is the most natural way for children to learn, and perhaps the simplest way for them to heal themselves. There are such strong connections between play, learning, and healing, that it is an accepted form of therapy (Axline, 1969).

Another aspect of free school philosophy that promotes healing is the encouragement and the right to physically move at will. Free school students enjoy freedom of movement in what Appleton (2000) referred to as “free-range education” (p. 1). Knaster (1996) discussed some of the negative consequences that school can have on young bodies including “constipation, urinary disorders... damage to their capacity to know when their bodies need to perform normal functions” (p. 37). These problems can continue well into adulthood. Knaster also claimed that the U.S. educational system “does not teach us what is fundamental to basic self-knowledge--awareness of our bodies” (p. 36), which reinforced the idea that self knowledge is an important aspect of education. Neill (1992) compared traditional schools to an army regiment and denounced that “a child sits on his bottom most of the time at an age when the whole human instinct is to move” (p. 4) leading to what he called the “devitalization” (p. 4) of young people.

When students must repress natural tendencies such as the instinct to move their bodies or to express their emotions openly, a “closing off” phenomenon that Reich (1983) labeled “armoring” happens. Armoring, as defined by Reich, “refers to the total functions essentially as a defense against the breakthrough of emotions--primarily anxiety, rage, and sexual excitation” (p. 11). Armoring is characterized by anxiousness combined with physical pain, rigidity, musculature spasms, and stiffness. It is compounded by repression, guilt, and shame. At Summerhill, Neill worked to heal students by removing their armor through techniques he learned from Reich (Appleton, 2000). Holding “private lessons” with students, Neill (1992) used a combination of talk therapy and reflexology.

Age Blending Heals

The free school practice of age-mixing can be healing and empowering for many students. An 8 year old lecturing the student body about the importance of a certain rule that she helped create is a beautiful sight, and it is a common occurrence in free schools. I see it happen almost every day. Age blending can build self esteem, personal confidence, public speaking skills, and solid experience in creating community.

Another option age mixing provides is flexibility in age identification. Occasionally, a child needs to regress back to a previous development state and will eventually mature after some time to play around at being younger. Other students may just need to be identified with an age older or younger than their actual age from birth. In a mixed age group, no one needs to notice or make a big deal out of someone associating with a different age group. The freedom to identify your self beyond your age category is liberating for many young people.

Freedom Heals Most Wounds

Freedom can help people heal themselves from past trauma. Free schools can help a student recover from negative experiences. This is especially true when the trauma was school related, but also works when the issues relate to family of origin dynamics. I have gone through many emotional roller coasters with students while they worked out social or academic problems, searched for their passions, or balanced out their desires. The deeply personal work that some students in free schools engage in will never show up on a transcript with a letter grade, but it will empower them to follow a course of life-long learning and increase their confidence in their ability to pursue and achieve happiness.

Free schools, such as Summerhill, Sudbury Valley, Albany Free School, SFS, and many hundreds more throughout the world, have been using the healing power of freedom as their guiding principle for many years now. The methods that free schools use are based on ideas put forth by educators such as Neill (1992) who maintained, over a very long time span, a deep faith in the inherent wisdom and goodness of children (p. 6). This belief in the goodness of human nature is a fundamental part of free schools' trust in freedom. It mirrors the belief found in holistic health that the universe and everyone in it naturally moves towards holistic balance and completeness. From this point of view, freedom does not have to be feared. If human nature is inherently good, then we can trust children to make conscientious decisions, especially when we allow children to experience the realities of responsibilities that come with decision making.

Specific Health Concerns

Free schools help heal certain disorders and other barriers to learning. They may also prevent problems from developing. At free schools, children, adolescents, and all associated behavior, are not viewed as inherent problems. Also, children's natural instinct to physically move around a lot is respected at a free school, not viewed as a defect (Neill, 1992). Freedom solves many of the negative feelings that children have developed for school and the problems that they have experienced in them.

Nature Deficit Disorder

A relatively new theory relating to child psychology and education, Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD), offers an explanation for certain trends found in modern young people. The main theory behind NDD is that because humans have become so disconnected and separated from the earth and nature, there is a deep wound that manifests in a variety of ways including aggression, shorter attention spans, hyperactivity, obesity, headaches, and depression (Wiser, 2005). School itself is also associated with these same physical problems by some educators (Mercogliano, 2004).

Nature is a fantastic teacher and learning resource because it never stops invoking a sense of wonder. We can learn so many different lessons from that one infinite source, nature. Heschel advised that "The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living" (quoted by Wiser, para. 7). Freedom in nature allows wonder to flourish, and allows children essential learning experiences.

Free schools have always been ahead of their time and have done things instinctively without waiting for the research. They used nature as a teacher long before the term NDD was created. Many free schools (such as Summerhill and Sudbury Valley) are located on several acres of land to ensure students' access to nature. Other schools (such as Albany Free School) have

purchased land off-campus to be able to bring students to on a regular basis. Inner city schools (such as SFS) plan regular outings and camping trips as well as projects such as gardening.

Many people think of free schools as new, experimental, or progressive. Yet, in many ways, free schools are closer to an ancient system of learning. For thousands of years, learning was a natural process of life. Education as a formal institution did not exist. Knowledge was passed on from person to person and generation to generation through direct practice, observation, and informal communication. Human beings learned much from the natural world then. Our ancestors watched the stars and other patterns in nature. They observed animals and experimented with plants for food and medicine.

Nature played an important role in my early years of learning. Growing up in an environment close to nature is an experience that I would not trade for anything. My current work is mostly with inner-city youth and I have witnessed many beautiful, transformative incidents in the process of exposing inner-city youth to nature. There would surely be lower rates of ADHD if young people spent more time in nature.

ADD, ODD, and ADHD: Just Say No

Many of the students at SFS over the years have been classified something or another (or both) and most of the time they don't experience the same difficulties in our free setting. I have heard students compare notes on all the different drugs and discuss how going to SFS made the drugs unnecessary. Mercogliano (2004) believed that:

moving away from the mechanical theory of an epidemic of faulty brain chemistry and towards a compassionate consideration of the individual quality of [students'] lives, both inner and outer . . . it is possible without labels and drugs to help distressed children grow into authentic, competent individuals eager to make the most of their lives and contribute to the world around them. (xii)

Several writers and medical professionals have charged the entire category of "attention disorders" to be falsely contrived (Armstrong, 1995). Breeding (2000) stated that even the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and other prominent health related organizations have admitted that "no objective validation of the medical diagnosis of ADHD exists" (para 16). Breeding quoted another doctor, Baughman (1996), who conducted research on brain scans of people with the label ADHD and found "no basis for evidence of a medically based problem" (para. 27). There is also no medically diagnosable problem with children labeled with Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD)--just common symptoms of childhood and adolescence, such as defiance and opposition toward authority. As Zimmerman argued, "we have turned to medicine to deal with what are not really medical problems at all, but rather social, educational, and spiritual ones" (para. 42).

Other countries certainly do not have anywhere near the amount of young people suffering from depression, insomnia, and attention "disorders." Breeding (2000) states that "Over 90% of the world's amphetamine based drugs (such as Ritalin) are used on American children" (para. 18). There is disturbing evidence that many young people are being diagnosed almost exclusively based on their teacher's statements. Teachers are not doctors, and are not trained to diagnosis disorders or prescribe medications, but unfortunately, teachers are effectively playing the role of doctors far too often. Besides their lack of medical training, there is a lack of objectivity. Teachers are too likely to label every challenging young person as having some sort

of disorder (Armstrong, 1995).

Many parents are pressured to drug their children because of problems in school and some are even mandated to do so. Minnesota has actually passed a law against this practice. Too often, doctors aim to appease parents, schools, and of course, pharmaceutical companies. The drug companies that make a fortune on the legal drugging of U.S. children also encourage misdiagnosis by spending vast amounts of money on misleading and vague advertising. For a nation that still uses the tired, old, ironic slogan "Say No to Drugs," the amount of young people in the U.S. taking legal stimulant-based drugs is astonishing--over eight million (Breeding, 2000). The numbers of students on legal drugs and new disorders have been steadily growing every year. Young people have no legal rights to say no with.

Equally bizarre and disturbing is the fact that children as young as 2 and 3 years old are being prescribed heavy psychotic drugs. There are no established facts regarding the long term effects of these intense drugs on children that young or children at all, not even teenagers (Breeding, 2000). As a society, the U.S. is performing the largest drug experiment in history, and we are using millions of our most helpless citizens as guinea pigs.

Deschooling as Healing Process

Unfortunately, freedom is not a quick fix, the way that medication often appears to be. Free school methods are best observed over time and they require the patience of all of those involved. Like learning, healing is a process. While some results of the power of freedom are seen right away, oppressive societies sometimes takes many decades to heal. For individual students, months or years of freedom are sometimes required just to move beyond the required "deschooling" stage.

Deschooling is a term that I use to describe an initial stage of healing a student's aversion to learning. It's like undoing most of what an individual has been taught about school and starting over. Neill (1992) believed that the free school "recovery time is in direct proportion to the hatred that their last school gave them" (p. 10) and estimated six to twelve months as an average. I spent my first year at SFS sleeping, writing depressing poetry, avoiding adults, and reading children's books that were way below my reading ability. It was heavenly.

After deschooling, attitudes can become less reactionary and more open to the true joy of learning in freedom. Non-free schools encourage reactionary behavior by demanding control while removing meaningful responsibility. Deschooling works as vital component of free school healing because the mind is wired to want to learn even if it hates school. If left to it's own instincts, the mind continues our whole lives to thirst for knowledge and understanding. (Kohn, 2004).

Unfortunately, some students can't adjust fast enough to flourish within our system. This is part of why Neill (1992) would not take students over the age of twelve (p. 62), a practice that SFS has never adopted. A difficult challenge for all new students is to forget the idea of the adults always being in charge. Some young people can't break the habit of raising their hands to ask permission to speak or go to the bathroom.

Although free schools put little or no emphasis on testing as a measure of learning, my personal experience is that most free school students actually do better on standardized tests than their non-free schooled peers. Galley (2004) discussed the results of a longitudinal study on Sudbury Valley School graduates and reported that free schooled students and alumni report

going on to good colleges and obtaining meaningful work. Even more importantly, Harber (1997) found that alumni studies showed that “the school created traits in them such as a strong sense of responsibility, the ability to take initiative and solve problems, an ability to communicate effectively, and a high commitment to the field in which employment was sought” (para. 43). While there are few studies of this kind, the available research shows that free schools work well for the majority of their students.

Freedom and Learning

Free schools believe in the great American values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all community members--even if they are wearing a pony costume or sagging pants. Freedom of expression is necessary to heal individual students and to help form healthy learning environments. By encouraging freedom of movement and thought, free schools create atmospheres of healing and allow students to be their own guides. In practice, freedom can mean going to the bathroom when instructed to do so by instinct, not by a teacher. It can mean listening to music while you solve math puzzles, going on a walk, or reading whatever book you want to when you feel like it. It means being physically free to move, emotionally free to cry, mentally free to speak up. It almost always means learning what you want to learn.

Learning is not a passive experience for most free scholars because school is a place to transform their lives into whatever shape they want to explore. The students can, and do, transform the school itself. Free schools can mean different things to different people, even within the same school. Many free schools adapt themselves so completely to the student that the school basically serves whatever purpose it can that the student needs them to.

Recently, I had a 2002 alumni from SFS refer some current high school students to the school. He had been the type that never got too involved in school meetings or events. He never caused problems, but he did not seem very into anything and was not part of the core group. I was surprised when I heard him talk about his impressions of the school. He explained it, very eloquently and enthusiastically, to his young friends. This experience made me remember that it's not just the super involved, obvious success stories that benefit from free schools. The power of freedom had touched this young man deeply and he understood it without ever reading a single book on alternative education.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Neill (1992) thought that most bad things in the world, including war and racism, were caused by unhappiness (p. 7). One of the ten Summerhill principles affirm that the purposes of both education and learning are to work joyfully and to find happiness. Unfortunately, that is not how most people describe their experiences in school. Ask five young people to answer honestly about their feelings regarding school and chances are high that the best response you'll get is resignation.

Obviously pursuing happiness requires each of us to discover and fulfill different paths towards maturity and fulfillment. By allowing each student to discover and follow what Bouklas (2004) called a child's “maturational path,” which is a unique path for each individual (p. 6), free schools promote empowerment and healing. Bouklas stated that we can be easily knocked off of our paths by “the constant exposure to energies that surpass our ability to process them” (p. 51) and that “if there is enough blocking of our energy, we may be alive but we become numb” (p. 51). Numbness, according to Bouklas, is a defense mechanism (similar to Reich's concept of

armor) that is commonly used to avoid the feelings that students experience and are helpless to express (p. 51).

Unfortunately, as a society, we are attempting to educate mass amounts of students all together at the same time. Therefore, schools must attempt to reach a huge goal under impossible circumstances. In a vain attempt to mass-educate, school systems must keep youth segregated by age and feed them a strictly prescribed diet of specific information chunks designed to indoctrinate them into perpetuating the cycle of hierarchy. There is simply no time for the pursuit of individual happiness.

Lack of Freedom

Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, no one but ourselves can free our minds--Bob Marley

When there is a lack of freedom--on any level, including physical, emotional, or mental--serious problems can arise in any of these areas. Most often, lack of freedom leads to fear, anger, and unhappiness. In my experience as a teacher, and according to other holistic healers and teachers, these emotions are negative barriers to good health and learning.

Lack of freedom in schools leads to what Marley (1980) described as "mental slavery." Symptoms besides those previously mentioned include: aggression, boredom, ADD, ADHD, ODD, depression, headaches, stomach aches, anxiety disorders, violence, and more. Perhaps these symptoms are perfectly reasonable responses to spending 30 hours a week for most of your childhood in an institution that was designed to brainwash you into believing you are a powerless, stupid cog in a machine. As Gatto (1996) wrote, reflecting on his 30 years teaching in U.S. public schools, "All the schools that I worked for taught nonsense up front and under the table they taught people to be dumb, to be slavish, to be frightened and dependent" (p. 47). Gatto spoke up to force change within the school systems and found a large and eager audience--fed up students and their families.

When Freedom Rings

When freedom is cultivated in educational settings, it can serve the goal of enhanced learning in many ways. Modern educational theories stress the importance of understanding and implementing methods that support multiple intelligences and emotional intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Methods based on these theories lead to more authentic assessments and an increase in high order thinking for students. Freedom can provide a solution to the lack of support for highly differentiated curriculum and activities found in most schools.

Freedom can increase emotional intelligence in students and in school environments. Through holism and by placing emphasis on individual students' abilities to express their personal power, follow their own interests, and direct their own lives, free schools create holistic environments where students can be emotional beings. The emphasis on emotional expression and support helps enhance students' ability to develop social skills that are essential for creating emotional intelligence. In addition, the school meetings and other aspects of running their own school helps students develop empathy. Gardner (1983) showed a direct link between empathy and emotional intelligence.

Responsibility

Freedom requires responsibility and accountability. In most schools, adults have all the decision-making power in all areas. In free schools, students and staff are equally responsible for creating rules, enforcing them, and other disciplinary matters. All members of the free school

community share roles and responsibilities, including purchasing materials, planning events, organizing curriculum, fundraising, and cleaning tasks. Students can learn by making their own decisions and solving their own problems, yet schools deliberately exclude them from the very processes that offer such opportunities. Many of public school's basic routines are designed with an emphasis on social control and values such as obedience and passivity (Chomsky, 2003). Actual intellectual engagement is often lost in the blizzard of busywork worksheets, tardy slips, and lost identification badges.

The increased need for responsibility and the rewards of operating from your own motivation often leads to the ability to be more responsible (Kohn, 2004). In these ways, free schools work to develop students' sense of personal responsibility through encouraging freedom and liberty. These important values inherently foster feelings of responsibility (Neill, 1992). In turn, societies are healthier when people take more personal responsibility for their lives. Free Schools, Freedom, and Social Responsibility

Free schools promote and help create a more free and just society. As every slave master knows, empowerment is contagious and all sorts of things spread it all around. Education is especially dangerous to slave holders. The (not very) hidden curriculum in non-free schools is the teaching of one basic tenet over and over again in a thousand different ways. The message which is constantly reinforced to children day every day is that following directions quickly and obediently is the same as being a good student (Gatto, 1992).

Following orders enables and encourages people to remain detached from their own actions. Coercion and lack of choice foster resentment--sometimes expressed, often repressed--towards those in power. When students transform their own ideas into actions, make their own choices, and have real responsibilities in their lives, they stay more engaged and therefore learn in a deeper way. Gatto (2006) cited many other authors in his writings on the connections between intellectually shallow education and the maintenance of social and economic classes (pp. 151-152). Gatto stated that:

America's unprecedented global power and spectacular material wealth are a direct product of

a third rate educational system, upon whose inefficiency in developing intellect and character

they depend. If we educated better, we could not sustain the corporate utopia we have made.

Schools build national wealth by tearing down personal sovereignty, morality, and family life.

(p. 152)

Gatto also detailed the history of the U.S. school system and showed how the Prussian military, organized religion, and big corporations all played parts in influencing the evolution of U.S. schools systems.

Chomsky (2003) also wrote extensively on the connections between school, learning, and society. According to Chomsky, "An approach to education which emphasizes such values as punctuality and obedience is very well suited for training factory workers. . . it is not at all suited to the humanistic conception of creative and independent individuals" (p. 171). Neill (1992) made similar statements decades earlier and showed the implications and outcomes of

traditional educational institutions. Neill believed that the real effect of forced learning was: converting [students] into will-less adults . . . acceptors of the status quo--a good thing for a society that needs obedient sitters in dreary desks, standers in shops, mechanical catchers of the 8:30 suburban train, a society, in short, that is carried on the shoulders of a scared little man--the scared to death conformist. (p. 15)

The complex part that educational institutions play in maintaining the status quo are obvious in many ways, but most adults choose to ignore or forget the subject.

Freedom in educational settings can improve society by building direct experience in democratic participation, action, and theory. Breeding (1996) defined adultism as “the systematic mistreatment of young people by adults simply because they are young” (p. 63) and explained how it self-perpetuates, “When we are treated poorly as children, we internalize the idea and feelings that life is not fair; that rank and power should be used for personal advantage; and that we are somehow unworthy of respect, incapable of clear thinking, and unable to become our own authority” (p. 63). If we want young people to be active members of our democratic government and society then why would we raise them in classrooms and schools run like dictatorships? Kohn (2004) wrote that, by lessening adult authority in schools, “students can learn more deeply . . . and become more empowered as active participants in their lives and in their societies” (p. 32). Instead of encouraging passive obedience, free schools require students to think for themselves and to be active in their communities.

So Free

My friend Zoe runs around in circles singing during Yoga class. She calls it her yoga. “She’s so free,” said Zoe’s childcare provider, with a look conveying the obvious--some battles are not worth fighting with this particular 3 year old. No one in the class seems bothered so we continue with our stretching while Zoe follows her own yoga until she gets bored and runs off. One day I tell Zoe’s mom, Kat, one of the things I love most about Zoe.

“She’s so free,” I say, enthusiastically.

“I know,” Kat replied, slightly rolling her eyes, “but I don’t worry too much. Public school will beat it out of her.”

Unfortunately, the idea of school being a place for the natural state of freedom to be beaten out of children is overwhelmingly common. Discipline and fear are a part of most schools. It is understood and accepted that children will hate the place they spend thirteen academic years of their young lives. They will complain frequently, receiving little or no sympathy. There will be little or no changes made in response to their concerns in regards to justice or methods. The most likely help to ever appear is a prescription for some drug or another. I am afraid that Kat is right and I feel protective of Zoe’s fleeting freedom to practice her very own yoga.

In truth, the U.S. does not practice the belief that all people are created equal. Rather, young people only get to be equal when they have reached a certain age. As U.S. citizens with almost no legal rights--including no rights to representation in government--children are the most vulnerable members of our society. Lack of freedom, especially when combined with harsh treatment, contributes to high drop-out rates, youth crime, homelessness, and suicide. We have a moral obligation to advocate educational freedom for children.

There are many essential reasons to change our current beliefs and practices about

education and the nature of learning, but the holistic well-being of young people is the best reason of all. Holistic health and education can be practiced together to maximize the potential for transformation found in each concept. Free schools serve as demonstrations of how these two fields can be blended and how natural learning can be. Schools can better serve their students by implementing elements of holistic health and education, such as freedom. Freedom is essential to pursue happiness, and a powerful healing force in education.

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