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A Culture of Non-Judgment

Former Students' Perspectives on the Sudbury Model Schools' Justice System, Culture, and Relatedness

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of 14 adults who attended Sudbury model schools in the Netherlands, Israel, and the U.S. These schools emphasize student autonomy, egalitarian relationships, and minimal hierarchy. Using thematic analysis and open-ended questions, the study examines how the justice system, school culture, and staff roles supported students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT: Deci & Ryan, 2000). Findings highlight how the justice system fostered inclusivity, mutual respect, and internalization of community norms, contributing to a culture that discouraged bullying and promoted belonging. Staff were viewed as trusted mentors rather than authority figures, reinforcing autonomy and competence. The study offers a nuanced counterpoint to critiques that SDE models reproduce neoliberal subjectivities, showing how autonomy embedded in relational safety can foster inclusion. These insights contribute to educational change debates by illustrating how non-hierarchical models can enhance student well-being and reimagine authority in schools.

Introduction

Deci and Ryan (2000), based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), argued that intrinsic motivation is more likely to flourish in contexts where there is a secure relational base. SDT identified relatedness, autonomy, and competence as fundamental psychological needs essential for well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2017). Autonomy means feeling in control of your own actions and seeing yourself as the source of your behavior. Competence is the need to feel capable and effective in interacting with your environment. Relatedness is the desire to feel connected to others and to have a sense of belonging with both individuals and your community. According to SDT, competence is closely linked to autonomy and thrives in environments that provide security and relatedness. This interplay is essential for the development of autonomous forms of motivation. Collectively, these needs underpin personal growth and contribute to overall psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2017). The idea is that when individuals feel emotionally connected and supported by others, it promotes a sense of security and belonging. When it comes to relatedness with regard to school-age children in education (typically ages 4 to 18) [*], most SDT research focused on the hierarchical dependency dynamics between teacher and student, even in the more progressive schools (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2008a, 2012; Ryan et al., 2021; Ryan & Lynch, 2003). Relatedness is often presented in these studies as the result of the degree of autonomy support given by teachers. However, the extent to which teachers can support autonomy in these settings is limited by mandatory school programs and national curriculum requirements, which inherently restrict the scope for self-determination and may influence relatedness.

Because little is known about autonomy and relatedness in other educational settings this study investigated how these dynamics function outside conventional schooling structures. We looked at the experiences of 14 graduates from a total of eight Sudbury model schools spread across three countries. Sudbury schools, a type of democratic education for school-aged children of all ages, offer *Self-Directed Education* (SDE) defined by Gray (2023) as, "allowing the child to take charge of all his education" (p. 2). This study centers on three interrelated themes: experiences with the schools' justice system, with adults who work in these schools, and with the broader school culture. In the context of this study, we refer to culture as the way people interact with one another. This study is part of a larger qualitative research project using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) to explore the long-term effects of Sudbury schools on these graduates' lives.

This study examined whether the Sudbury model schools' justice systems, as part of their organizational structure, influenced school culture and students' sense of relatedness—including with adult staff. It is worth noting that the language used within Sudbury model schools often mirrors terminology from the broader societal 'justice system.' Given critiques raised by contemporary political movements—such as Black Lives Matter and decarceration activism—that challenge the fairness and equity of such systems, this terminology warrants critical reflection. While the present study adopts the language used by the schools themselves, future research may

[*] Because the compulsory school ages vary by country, we more generally refer to the school-age groups from kindergarten (usually ages 4–6) through 12th grade (ages 17–18). It includes all years of formal education before students enter higher education.

consider interrogating these terms and the assumptions they carry. Still, it is fair to say that Sudbury schools offer novel insights into relational dynamics, particularly in student-adult interactions, due to their unique structure that supports a fully age-mixed educational environment, encompassing all school-age groups and adult staff.

The article opens with background on Sudbury model schools, then explores relatedness in human behavior, education, and legal systems. It examines student–adult relationships in schools and their impact on teachers' roles, followed by the methodology. Findings highlight how legal systems, adult roles, and school culture support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study concludes with a discussion linking the results to existing literature.

Research Background

Schools without Hierarchy: Sudbury Model Schools

While Dewey (1903) is recognized for his democratic principles in education, democratic schools, particularly those following the Sudbury model, took these ideas to a more radical, student-centered level (Traxler, 2015). Sudbury model schools do not offer a set curriculum, leaving the choice of curriculum up to the student to pursue a course of study that is appropriate for the individual. In these schools, students have an equal say in school organization, including the justice system, alongside adults. Daily practices emphasize students' freedom of action and choice, with adults holding no special decision-making power, either in governance or personal student matters. This structure creates a unique dynamic between adults and students aged 4 to 18, distinct from other school systems, including many democratic ones.

Globally, schools similar in philosophy and organization to the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts emphasized self-government and individual autonomy within an age-mixed community that is in support of competence and personal development (Gray et al., 2021; Gray & Feldman, 2004; Rietmulder, 2019). This age-mix is characterized by the free association of people of K-12 ages and adults, in the building of the school and its premises (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008; Rietmulder, 2019). While not all identify as Sudbury schools, they share core principles such as the freedom for students to communicate, form friendships, and choose how to spend their time. Hartkamp-Bakker and Martens (2024) found that in the social context of Sudbury model schools, the culture of non-interference with personal choices (culture of respect) influenced students focusing attention on an internal locus of causality of motivation for life choices, which ultimately resulted in taking ownership of their lives. Particularly, emphasis was placed on true choice and its effect on autonomy and competence.

Riley (2016), emphasized that when relatedness is nurtured—especially in non-traditional learning environments—it can enhance a learner's autonomy and competence as well. Her research suggests that strong, trusting relationships within learning communities, including those outside conventional schooling structures, are essential for supporting internal motivation and psychological growth. Despite limited research on Sudbury model schools, their practices align with the basic needs outlined in SDT, warranting further exploration. Understanding how the justice system in these schools influences adult roles, school culture, and relationships could deepen our knowledge of relatedness from an SDT perspective. Specifically, this inquiry could shed light on how power and control dynamics might impact relatedness and a broader school culture.

Adult status in Sudbury model schools. In Sudbury model schools, adults who work in the school, including teachers, are called staff. In these schools "everyone is both teacher and student" (Gray et al., 2021, p. 6). The role of staff in a Sudbury Model School is to act as facilitators, mentors, role model and equal participants in the democratic community, supporting students' self-directed learning and the overall functioning of the school without imposing authority (Gray et al., 2021; Traxler, 2015). Staff and students share organizational roles, such as clerkships, filled through annual elections. Staff avoid initiating activities with specific educational goals for the students because this could undermine students' motivation and agency, which does not mean that they do not engage in or initiate activities (Gray et al., 2021; Von Duyke, 2013).

The justice system in Sudbury model schools. A defining feature of Sudbury model schools is their justice system, which includes a Judicial Committee (JC) composed of a representative selection of the school community (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008; Feldman, 2001; Gray et al., 2021; Harmsen, 2020; Rietmulder, 2019). This system, alongside the school meeting, helps manage social dynamics, resolve conflicts, and engage in democratic processes. Both students and staff have equal say, fostering community and shared responsibility (Gray et al., 2021).

The JC operates on the belief that people of all ages can make ethical decisions and understand right from wrong (Greenberg, 2007). While there is evidence that young people are capable of ethical decision-making, particularly in familiar or straightforward contexts (e.g. Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Piaget, 1948), critics argue that they benefit from scaffolding, mentorship, and social frameworks to refine their reasoning (e.g. Curren, 2020; Curren & Ryan, 2020) or lack the neurological basis to consistently make ethical decisions, especially under pressure or in complex situations (e.g. Arain et al., 2013; Blakemore, 2012). Research found that by prioritizing dialogue and resolution over punishment, a practice similar to Restorative Justice (RJ) approaches, the JC played a crucial role in promoting accountability and awareness of justice (Feldman, 2001; Harmsen, 2020). According to Feldman (2001) the role of the JC was not to teach, but to facilitate a process in which students and staff together address violations of democratically established community norms.

The culture in Sudbury model schools. Greenberg (2016) suggested that culture is a unique and defining characteristic of a Sudbury Model School, distinctly tied to this type of educational environment. While he explained that culture emerges from a rich tapestry of themes developed over the school's history, he also highlighted how culture in general can be observed in the way shared values are consistently embodied in daily practices and actions. Hartkamp-Bakker and Martens (2024), identified a culture of non-interference as a key theme emerging from their data, highlighting how this culture fostered an environment where students could take ownership of their lives and choices. While RJ literature highlights its role in fostering a respectful, safe and tolerant culture in schools (e.g. Archibold, 2014; Sandwick et al., 2019; Vaandering, 2014), there is a notable lack of research exploring effects of the JC on the culture and relatedness within Sudbury model schools.

Freedom, privilege, and the limits of autonomy in SDE. Serious attention must be given to both the strengths and potential limitations of the Sudbury model of schooling. While its emphasis on student autonomy, democratic governance, and non-hierarchical relationships presents a compelling alternative to traditional education, it is essential to critically examine the assumptions that underpin this approach. Wilson (2015, 2016, 2017) has argued that certain elements of the model may reflect neoliberal ideologies, particularly its strong focus on individual

choice and personal responsibility. Tougas (2024) similarly warns that SDE contexts can reproduce neoliberal subjectivity unless there is a conscious effort to resist and disrupt such frameworks. Her work prompts important questions about how truly liberatory SDE contexts can be, and under what conditions it supports collective well-being rather than individualistic self-optimization. Proponents of SDE models and Sudbury schools emphasize that its commitment to individual autonomy does not preclude social cohesion. On the contrary, they argue that the strong sense of community and interconnectedness within these schools plays a crucial role in fostering social bonding alongside individual development (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008; Gray et al., 2021; Gray & Feldman, 2004; Rietmulder, 2019). Hill (2018) adds an important dimension of critique by exploring how Sudbury Valley and other SDE environments can unintentionally reproduce privilege, particularly in terms of race, class, and cultural capital. Her work challenges the notion that freedom is experienced equally by all students, pointing out that access to self-direction may be shaped by prior experiences, social positioning, and unspoken norms within these communities. Taken together, these perspectives highlight the importance of studying SDE models like Sudbury schools more closely—not only to understand their transformative potential, but also to critically examine the social dynamics and structural conditions that shape who is truly empowered by them. SDT, as a humanistic-psychological theory, offers a particularly powerful lens for this work, as it is grounded in the idea that the psychological basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universal across cultures (Ryan et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It repeatedly emphasizes that autonomy is not about individualism or selfishness, but about experiencing a sense of volition and connection within meaningful relationships—making it especially well-suited to assess both the promises and limitations of educational models that claim to prioritize freedom.

Relatedness: A Closer Look

In SDT, relatedness refers to the basic psychological human need to feel a sense of connection and belonging with others, also defined as a "sense of belongingness and connectedness with persons, a group, or a culture" (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 64). It involves experiencing oneself as cared for within a social context. In educational settings, relatedness is supported when students feel understood, respected, and emotionally connected to peers and adults. This sense of connection has been linked to increased intrinsic motivation, engagement, and emotional well-being in various settings and irrespective of ethnic or cultural differences (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Relatedness and norm internalization. External regulation through punishment and reward can significantly influence behavior, as behaviorist studies showed, but SDT claimed this type of motivation is unsustainable and can harm psychological development (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2017). SDT emphasized that healthy psychological development is linked to the degree in which autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported (Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that from an evolutionary perspective, the human need for relatedness—our "tendencies to cohere with one's group, feel connection, and internalize group values to coordinate with others" (p. 253)—has been crucial for the success of hunter-gatherer societies. This drive to belong to social groups is central to human behavior (Rogoff, 2003).

The human complex social interactions, especially among non-relatives, depend on shared norms that enable peaceful coexistence (Boehm, 2012). SDT emphasized that capacities for social integration and autonomous self-regulation allow individuals to engage meaningfully in social networks while preserving their values and independence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to them, these capacities are essential for building healthy relationships, participating in social networks,

and adapting to the demands of social life while staying true to one's own values and objectives. Autonomy plays a critical role in behavioral adaptation, allowing individuals to voluntarily comply with duties or norms (Ryan & Deci, 2019). This voluntariness is driven by the value placed on behaviors by significant others (Ryan & Deci, 2000a), fostering a "motivational basis for internalization" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 253). Apparently, SDT attaches value to the degree of personal choice to agree with the group norm. In fact, it emphasizes the choice to be part of a group or community as a key factor in internalization based on intrinsic motivation. Thus, relatedness leads to behavior changes rooted in the desire to belong, we therefore continue to explore how in general school justice systems might support these socialization processes through relatedness.

Relatedness support by schools' justice systems. Justice systems have historically relied on punishment and external regulation to enforce social norms (Boehm, 2012; Buckholtz & Marois, 2012). Country or state justice systems are often viewed as systems of injustice, criticized for neglecting victims, lacking fairness and transparency, and failing to effectively address crime (Gabbay, 2005). In response to these concerns, a shift toward more humane RJ models has emerged, acknowledging the limitations of exclusionary penalties and aiming to repair harm through inclusive, community-based processes. RJ practices began to be implemented in schools primarily in the 1990s and early 2000s (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005), gaining traction as part of a broader movement to address the harms of zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline (like suspensions and expulsions), especially in the U.S., Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (McCluskey et al., 2008). In schools, RJ aims to foster inclusivity, safety, and connectedness, strengthening students' sense of relatedness (Sandwick et al., 2019). RJ in schools often involves disciplinary meetings where students participate in decision-making. Research suggests that when students have a voice, they are more likely to perceive rules and authority as fair (Tyler, 2006).

RJ integrates firm normative structures with compassionate support (Wachtel & McCold, 2001), emphasizing fairness, condemning actions rather than individuals, and involving all parties in conflict resolution (Preston & O′Connell, 2005). It balances structure (fair rules and treatment of violations) with support (being heard, respected, and cared for), fostering trust and cooperation even in disciplinary contexts (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). In schools, RJ promotes a relationship-centered, non-punitive approach, where restorative sanctions are collaboratively determined and framed as logical outcomes rather than punishments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). However, while RJ encourages inclusive and participatory justice, it does not explicitly address the hierarchical relationship between students and adults. While participation fosters trust and legitimacy, authority remains adult-controlled. Even when restorative sanctions involve dialogue, the authority to enforce consequences typically remains with adults, reinforcing existing power structures.

While RJ models are increasingly implemented in conventional school systems, existing research largely focuses on contexts where adult authority remains central. Less is known about how justice is practiced in radically non-hierarchical environments, such as Sudbury model school settings, where students and staff are positioned as equals. In addition, the connection between SDT research and RJ practices remains underexplored, which is remarkable given that support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential in fostering behavioral change. Studies by Power and Hart (2005) and Youssef (2024) highlight the role of psychological need satisfaction in constructive discipline and rehabilitation, yet these are typically situated within adult-led frameworks. This raises important questions about how justice practices grounded in SDT might function in educational settings that reject traditional hierarchies altogether.

Another model, Kohlberg's Just Community approach (Kohlberg, 1986) similarly promoted student participation in disciplinary decisions (Oser et al., 2008; Power, 2002). However, it has been criticized for treating moral development as a predetermined outcome, reducing the democratic process to a means rather than an end (Feldman, 2001; Power, 2002). Moreover, it assumes that students' moral development is best shaped by educational authorities, reinforcing that structured hierarchy is needed (Curren, 2020). Curren and Ryan (2020) argued, based on SDT, that moral motivation in education develops best within autonomy-supportive environments, emphasizing the role of teachers in providing autonomy-supportive coaching to promote moral reflection and judgment. Feldman (2001), though, suggested that moral development can emerge outside traditional power structures in a moral community such as a democratic school.

Neither model, RJ nor the Just Community approach, examines the effect on relationships between students and adults in schools, focusing primarily on moral development and inclusivity. This leads us to examine further how relatedness is generally defined across different settings, with a focus on school-aged children and teenagers in relation to significant adults.

How relatedness is defined in various settings. Ryan and Deci (2017) highlighted that most school systems worldwide are control-based, with few reforms focused on supporting students' basic needs in all levels of the system. Many theorists argued that compulsory education, both in terms of attendance and the internal control exerted within schools, hinders personal development and trust in relationships (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Freire, 2005; Illich, 1971; Ryan & Lynch, 2003).

Teacher-directed environments dominate educational systems, and consequently, SDT research often focuses on relatedness within these authority-driven relationships (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2008a, 2012; Ryan et al., 2021; Ryan & Lynch, 2003). Teachers not only provide expertise but also wield supervisory power over students' behavior and achievements to meet the mandatory school requirements. This dynamic applies to almost all conventional schools, including the more progressive or democratic ones where power tends to be more hidden. Any form of power exerted over students—including covert influence such as conditional regard—is known to undermine their need for autonomy (Assor et al., 2004; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2016). So are other forms of hidden power that aim to push young people in the direction of desired behavior when it comes to meeting expectations about school achievements (Ryan et al., 2021; Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2016).

Research consistently showed that relatedness positively affects motivation and engagement in educational settings (Deci et al., 1991; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Watkins, 2005; Wentzel et al., 2004; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Schools that fostered a sense of belonging through positive peer and teacher interactions enhanced relatedness (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Salmela-Aro, 2017; Wentzel et al., 2004). When students feel respected and cared for by teachers, their sense of relatedness improves, which can foster better acceptance of classroom norms (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In adult authority-based environments, however, students may still behave in ways that are focused on gaining approval or a higher grade. This type of motivation is also known as introjection, when behavior is driven by, for example, the desire to please another (Ryan et al., 2021).

More generally, Ryan and Deci (2017) argued that humans have evolved to seek intimate, trusting relationships. Relationships that are self-chosen and formed in this way are thought to be highly autonomy supportive. Indeed, research on partner relationships showed that supporting each

other's autonomy strengthens bonds, fostering more equal and successful relationships (Deci et al., 2006; Kluwer et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2021). From these studies, it appears that equality in relationships seems to be an important factor. Research on basic need support between young people and adults in circumstances other than the teacher-student dynamic in schools is limited. A study by Assor et al. (2021) focused on relationships of teenagers with significant adults, such as parents. These authors revealed how autonomy support was interpreted by them as feeling respected, having the freedom to make their own decisions, explore different perspectives, and pursue different paths. This autonomy-support was found to strengthen their sense of competence and relatedness. These relationships appeared trustful and caring, free from control or coercion, as was also emphasized in research into partner relationships.

Given the authority dynamics between a teacher and a student that are common in most educational settings, we argue that this may affect the educative relationship between them. A teacher commonly has both a directive and evaluative role as well as a mentor/coach role. The latter role is particularly common in more progressive, child-centered educational models. To better understand the effect of these power dynamics, we further examined the implications in the teacher's role as a mentor/coach.

Implications of relatedness in the teacher's role as mentor/coach. Although the scope and purpose of mentoring and coaching differ (Viera, 2021), we hereby focus more broadly on the role of authority and relatedness in these type of interactions. In general, mentoring or peer coaching requires a non-evaluative and nonjudgmental relationship (Mullen, 2017). Research across various settings indicated that combining the roles of supervisor and mentor/coach is challenging, as the supervisory role can negatively impact the conditions needed for successful mentoring or coaching (e.g. Carr et al., 2017; Gallacher, 1997; Hudson, 2013; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Scandura, 1998; Tepper, 1995). For example, in the workplace, where managers hold the power to evaluate or terminate employees, this dynamic may impact the effectiveness of positive guidance or coaching, particularly when it involves subordinate groups (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1997). Individuals in dependency relationships may hesitate to speak openly due to fears of judgment or missed opportunities, a condition that hinders effective coaching or mentoring (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Tepper, 1995). This power dynamic is comparable to the position of a teacher in relation to a student regarding his school performance and behavior. However, there is limited scientific understanding of how such dynamics affect the mentor or coaching role in educational settings. Sudbury model schools provide an alternative environment in which to investigate these dynamics, as they intentionally avoid traditional hierarchies in adult–student relationships.

The Research Aim

This study aims to explore how the unique context of Sudbury model schools affected former students' experiences through the lens of SDT, with attention to the support of the three basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. As a focused subset of a larger project on the long-term effects of Sudbury schooling on graduates' lives, this research employs thematic analysis of open-ended responses to examine how three key elements — the schools' justice system, the role of staff, and culture — interact to shape those experiences.

Research Design

The study presented here examines the corresponding experiences with the justice system, the role of adults, and culture from 14 graduates from eight different Sudbury model schools in three countries, The Netherlands, Israel and the USA. The research made use of thematic analysis with a reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The following sections describe the methods used for data collection, participant selection, and analysis that led to the selection of the subset presented here.

Data Collection Procedures

The study focused on finding graduates from several Sudbury model and comparably organized schools in multiple countries. Only schools with an organizational structure and operational approach comparable to that of the Sudbury Valley School were selected, acknowledging that not all identify as Sudbury schools or use the name. A list of candidate schools was compiled through Google and Facebook searches, with their websites or informational pages reviewed for insights into internal organization and founding dates. Out of a pool of 55 schools across 13 countries, most of which were in the United States, contact was established with 15 schools from four countries that had been in existence long enough, allowing for participants who had left the school five or more years ago. Ultimately, eight schools participated in the study: six from the United States, two from Israel, and two from the Netherlands. The assumption was that bringing together experiences from several comparably organized schools from different countries would minimize individual school or country specific effects on the findings.

Prior to the study, ethical approval was obtained from the University ethics committee, including approval for privacy assurance through consent forms, anonymization of data and storage. The selection of participants was delegated to a designated contact person within each school, with the stipulation that participants must have attended the school for a minimum of five years and have accumulated a minimum of five years of post-school experience as an adult. A few exceptions to these criteria were allowed. To limit potential selection bias, each school was tasked with selecting two different individuals based on gender, background, school experience, and subsequent educational or career paths. A total of 14 participants were interviewed. From Israel, the Netherlands and from two schools in the US, two participants per school contributed, the remaining two schools in the US only provided one participant. To mitigate any potential bias, standardized interview guides were used, and coding and analysis of data was based on commonalities in answers of various participants. In addition, fellow researchers were used at various stages to assess and provide feedback on the research plan and its implementation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in virtual meetings using Microsoft Teams in 2021. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to guide the interviews (Kvale, 2007). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and consisted of five parts that explored different aspects. In part one they were asked about their current situation in terms of work, passions and status and was intended to get to know the person better. Part two focused on their history regarding the reason for choosing the school to better map out their personal situation when they were young. Part three was about their experience with elements of their Sudbury model schools during their school years, such as its structure, culture, activities and staff, and its effects on them. Part four questioned their after-school experience and adult-life history and possible

perceived impacts of the school. Part five asked for an overall reflection on what the school had meant to them. Audio recordings of each interview have been archived for analysis.

Transcripts of the interviews were anonymized (all names used in this study are pseudonyms) and documented by hand using an intelligent verbatim method (Bailey, 2008), capturing the meaning of what has been said, while still leaving room to accentuate relevant emotions or interruptions. The transcripts were then subjected to member checking by sending them to participants for validation (Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

Participants

An overview of participants and relevant data is presented in table 1. The data are presented in a way that ensures anonymity, preventing direct identification of individuals or schools. We deliberately chose Germanic-Anglo names for all participants to avoid associations with specific countries or schools and to enhance readability for an international audience.

Table 1

Demographic and Educational Background of Participants.

Name	Age	Pronouns	Prior School	Sudbury Yrs	School Size Then	Graduated
Andrew	35+	He/Him	Till age 7	11	20–35 → 36–50	10+ years ago
Beth	20-24	She/Her	Till age 11	6	51–80	0- 3 years ago
Claire	25-29	She/Her	Till age 10	8	20–35	10+ years ago
Ella	30-34	She/Her	Till age 12	6	36–50 → 51–80	10+ years ago
Helen	25-29	She/Her	Till age 10	6	<20 → 51–80	6–10 years ago
Jessica	30-34	She/Her	No	12	20–35	10+ years ago
Leo	25-29	He/Him	Till age 10	8	51–80 → >80	6–10 years ago
Lillian	20-24	She/Her	No	11	20–35 → >80	3–5 years ago
Marcia	35+	She/Her	Till age 12	5	51–80	10+ years ago
Philip	25-29	He/Him	Till age 6	12	51–80	10+ years ago
Rachel	35+	She/Her	No	14	20–35	10+ years ago
Suzanne	25-29	She/Her	Till age 12	4.5	<20 → 20–35	6–10 years ago
Stephen	25-29	He/Him	Till age 15/16	2	<20	6–10 years ago
Ted	25-29	He/Him	Till age 13	5	20–35	3–5 years ago

Note. This table presents participant pseudonyms, age ranges, gender pronouns, prior conventional schooling years, duration of attendance at a Sudbury school, approximate school size during their time of attendance and estimated time since graduation. Pronouns are abbreviated (e.g., "He/Him" instead of "He/Him/His") for brevity.

Among the 14 participants, five used he/him/his pronouns and nine used she/her/hers, with none opting for they/them/theirs. Participants ranged in age from about 20 to 40 years. The time since leaving school varied from over ten years to approximately five years, with one participant, Beth, having left just a year prior. The length of time spent at the schools also varied: three attended throughout their entire childhood, two from around age six or seven, and eight joined between ages eight and 13. One participant, Stephen, attended for only two years, starting at age 16, while others attended for at least around five years.

While detailed information about participants' ethnic backgrounds was not collected, two participants disclosed being children of at least one immigrant parent, and one identified as belonging to an ethnic minority through her maternal heritage.

The schools themselves differed in size during the participants' time in the school, with estimates ranging from fewer than 20 to more than 80 students. Some experienced fluctuations in student numbers during their attendance, reflecting the growth of the school in the years they were there.

It is important to note the personal relationships some participants had with staff. Claire, Ella, and Marcia mentioned having parents who were founders of their school, with Claire and Marcia's parents serving as staff members. Andrew, Rachel, Helen, and Jessica mentioned that they had a parent who worked part-time as staff at the school. However, the parents of Andrew and Rachel only held these positions for a short number of years while they were still young students. The remaining seven participants did not have parents as staff or founders. It was anticipated that the family-tie could cause a bias, therefore more attention was given to look for similar experiences between multiple participants with diverse backgrounds.

Researcher Positionality

The first author had prior familiarity with four of the participants. One was a close relative, and three were former students encountered during the author's previous work and school visits. Of these three, one was a former student from the school where the author was employed at the time, while the other two were students met briefly during visits to other schools operating under similar educational models. These prior connections were limited in depth and duration, and no personal relationships were maintained beyond those initial encounters. They did, however, help to establish initial rapport during the interviews. Professional boundaries were observed throughout the research process, and reflexivity was maintained to support analytical rigor and minimize potential bias. The author's employment at a school operating under a similar model provided additional contextual understanding, which was used carefully and critically in the interpretation of findings.

Data Analysis Procedure and Selection of Findings

The purpose of the research was to explore shared experiences of these 14 graduates. The thematic analysis focused on identifying recurring meanings in the interviews and focused on identifying similar meanings in the responses of multiple individuals. The analysis proceeded in two phases. Initially, transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti analysis software, assigning codes to similar meanings in the transcripts both in-case and across-cases. Open-coding was used that represented the meaning as expressed by the participants (Charmaz, 2006) to bring together similar types of content. Each time a new transcription was completed it was added and the process of

assigning codes, comparing meanings and adding codes was repeated as an iterative process. The coding process was both inductive and informed by the executive researcher's contextual knowledge of Sudbury Model Schools, which allowed for the identification of nuanced patterns in the data. Themes were refined iteratively through a process of constant comparison, ensuring that they accurately represented participants' experiences while remaining sensitive to the interpretive lens of the researcher. Throughout the process of coding and interpretation, the work was regularly critically evaluated by fellow researchers to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in the data. Saturation of codes was reached after 11 cases.

In the second phase, the coded fragments were grouped into themes, refined and organized into a coherent framework. In addition, it was in this phase that quotes from Dutch participants were translated into English. Translating text potentially adds a subjective layer to qualitative data (Temple & Young, 2004), and translated it as close as possible to the original meaning. For the sake of presentation of the data, themes that seemed related were grouped together. In this study we report three groups of findings that appear intertwined, part 1) experiences with the justice system in the schools, part 2) experiences with the status of adults in the schools, and part 3) experiences with culture. Each part will be followed by a brief discussion, followed by general discussion binding all parts together.

Findings Part 1 – The Role of the Schools' Justice System

All participants referenced the role of a disciplinary meeting, typically called the JC, and its impact on them during the interviews. Their answers frequently referred to the JC, particularly to questions about the organizational structure of the schools, the effects of that structure on them, and the challenges they faced in school.

The Most Important One [Committee], Though, Is the Judicial Committee

Seven participants provided more detailed accounts of the function of the JC in their schools and confirmed high similarity in the organizational structure between their schools. Claire and Ted emphasized the JC's significance, with Ted describing it as, "the most important one [committee]," responsible for handling rule violations established by the school meeting. Jessica and Beth characterized the JC as a court-like body where both students and staff participated equally. According to Jessica, "if anybody had an issue or anyone saw a law being broken, they could fill out a complaint form and send it to the JC."

The process within the JC followed formal steps, as explained by Helen, Beth, and Jessica, including hearings where the complainant, defendant, and witnesses presented their cases before a decision was made. Jessica described due process:

> If they felt a rule was broken, the person would be charged with that rule and then given a chance to plead guilty or not guilty. If they pled guilty, they'd get a sentence. Then they had a chance to either accept or appeal the sentence.

Sentences, typically tied to the violated rule, served as reminders to follow school regulations, as noted by Helen, Jessica, and Beth. Across the seven participants, a key theme emerged: the JC's primary function was to maintain a safe environment by ensuring equal access to justice and a fair trial for all involved, facilitated by a peer-led committee.

The Judicial Committee and Students' Sense of Ownership for the Culture.

Eight participants identified the JC as a culture-defining element of their schools. A common theme in their responses was the emphasis on equal accountability—regardless of personal relationships—which helped shape interpersonal dynamics and, in turn, the overall school culture. Four participants highlighted the willingness to file complaints, even against friends, as a key part of taking ownership of the school's culture. The process of peer-led rule enforcement fostered a collective responsibility for maintaining the community's standards. Additionally, participants noted that the JC's focus was not on blame (*non-judgmental*), but on responsibility, which promoted acceptance of both the disciplinary process and personal accountability. The next two themes surfaced in the findings as important in establishing culture.

JC is reflecting appropriate behavior. Stephen and Beth described the JC as teaching boundaries and accountability, with Stephen stating, "I have been able to learn a part of my own accountability, that actions can also have consequences." Leo explained that the JC "is reflecting appropriate behavior" and provides insight into "what the community wants to see from you" in terms of behavior. This process helped students develop a sense of ownership over the school culture according to Leo, Ella, Rachel, Jessica, and Beth. Rachel elaborated on this by describing how peer involvement in the JC made students feel a greater responsibility for the community:

> They would be exposed to this process of peers ... talking about it in a respectful and fair way ... I think the fact that they felt they were a part of the Judicial Committee made them feel much greater ownership for the culture and for the school.

Rachel, along with Stephen and Leo, also emphasized that the JC was *non-judgmental* and focused on understanding behavior rather than assigning blame. As Leo noted, "we're not trying to point fingers, we're trying to understand what's going on." Jessica added that seeing both sides of the JC process—as a defendant and evaluator—helped students accept the system and understand its fairness: "You feel you're part of that process ... it makes more sense."

Beth explained that the practice of filing complaints against staff and friends was common, noting, "We write up staff, staff write up students, friends write up friends and it's okay." To write up or bring someone up are terms used in these schools for filing a complaint for the JC (Greenberg, 1987). Claire pointed out that holding friends accountable could be difficult but ultimately beneficial to the culture: "In order to have a fair system, your friends must hold you accountable ... it just brings a better culture, but it's not always easy." Both point to the equality in this environment, where adults and students have equal power when it comes to creating a good culture.

Ella, Ted, and Beth highlighted that taking responsibility for behavior and ownership of the culture was an inevitable result of the *clear structure* of the JC. Ted described the process as one where "you have to sort out all those interpersonal things" due to the system's clarity. However, participants acknowledged that this process could be challenging, particularly for newcomers.

People getting their head wrapped around JC is important in the culture. New students, especially those transitioning from traditional schools, often struggled to adjust to the JC process. Andrew observed that new students came with a mindset of "you never rat on your friends, adults are the bad guy, authority is the bad guy," but over time, they began to embrace the accountability that the JC fostered. He described the importance of students understanding the JC

for the school's culture: "I think people getting their head wrapped around JC is important in the culture of the school."

Ella, Ted, and Beth similarly noted that younger students might initially resist the system but eventually came to accept it as part of their progress. As Beth explained:

> Sometimes the younger students still get upset ... But as they get older ... it doesn't mean you are a bad person ... it just means you made a mistake and that is okay. You just have the opportunity to fix it.

These participants indicated that the JC was important in the transformation processes that were needed to embrace and help maintain the culture. Although not referenced here, we assume that it may also influence newcomers' experience of a different form of relational dynamic with adults in these schools, as adults were an integral part of the culture.

Brief Discussion

The participants indicate that the structure and organization of the schools, including the JC disciplinary process, create a clear and predictable environment. Participants emphasized that punitive measures in the JC were often directly related to the rule violation, consistent with RJ principles, where sanctions are meaningful and aim to repair harm (O′Connell, 2004). The JC process focused on discussing incidents and accepting responsibility, which participants perceived as fair, an essential component of RJ (Gregory & Cornell, 2009).

The formal nature of the JC structure provided a predictable environment where everyone knew what to expect, contributing to a sense of safety. When a process is seen as predictable, fair, and just, participants are more likely to accept the outcomes. A predictable structure supports autonomy and competence, as noted by Ryan and Deci (2020), and corresponds with the work of Hartkamp-Bakker and Martens (2024), who emphasized that a clear, transparent structure in these schools supports autonomy.

Participants also stressed the importance of the JC in fostering ownership of the school culture, respect, and tolerance, while minimizing dependency between students and staff in rule enforcement. Both groups held each other equally accountable for upholding democratically determined rules, leading to the internalization of community norms. Without a higher authority enforcing order, students, including friends, learned to report one another to the JC, reflecting a sense of responsibility for their environment and community well-being.

This internalization of norms, supported by the democratic and fair JC process, fostered respect for boundaries and relationships in the community, which aligns with findings by Harmsen (2020). However, participants noted that this transformation was often difficult, especially for newcomers unfamiliar with holding friends accountable or viewing adults as peers. This transformation that newcomers experienced, according to participants, appeared to be related to a shift from a focus on external motivations (external perceived locus of causality, or EPLOC) to more autonomous behavior driven by an internal perceived locus of causality (IPLOC) as defined by Ryan and Connell (1989).

It must be noted that in the study by Gray et al. (2021) not all former students experienced the processes in the JC in their school as fair and just. Whether processes in JC led to successful internalization and integration for all newcomers or if JC was always experienced as fair is beyond the scope of this study.

Findings Part 2 – The Status of Adults in the School Community

Adults in the Sudbury model schools, including those trained as teacher, have specific roles and are hired to fulfill designated functions. During the interviews, participants were asked about their perceptions of staff, the impact staff had on their lives, and any challenges they faced in relation to staff. All participants identified several roles that staff played, shaping their status within the schools. Two overarching categories of staff roles emerged: staff as unequal and staff as equal.

The perception of staff as unequal was noted by 12 participants in two main aspects: a) their role in running the school, including safeguarding the community (*safeguard*), where they held unequal responsibility (*unequal in responsibility*), and b) their role as a resource for students, serving as a more experienced and knowledgeable person from whom students could seek help (*unequal in experience*).

Furthermore, 10 participants referred to staff as equal, particularly regarding decision-making and rights, where staff and students held *equal status*. The following sections will explore these themes in detail.

They Clearly Had Some Responsibilities to Keep the School Running

Claire, Helen, Andrew, Ted, Jessica, and Lillian noted that staff had key responsibilities in running the school, which made them unequal in terms of responsibility (*unequal in responsibility*). Claire described staff as integral members of the community who fulfilled necessary tasks, stating, “Staff members were really just as much a part of your community ... they clearly had some responsibilities within the school to keep the school running.” Andrew highlighted how staff worked "silently in the background," managing things that would not happen without them, while Jessica referred to them as the "backbone" of the school. Ted and Lillian also mentioned specific tasks staff performed, such as administrative work, finances, managing parents, and maintaining the building.

These accounts suggest that while staff were deeply integrated into the community, they carried a greater share of responsibility for the school's operational functions. However, the impact of these roles seemed minimal to students at the time. Andrew, for example, noted that at age 12, he had little awareness of what staff did during the school day. This perception aligns with Gray et al. (2021), who also identified "unequal in responsibility" as a theme, albeit minimally, referring to staff as "effective administrators."

Additionally, Helen, Philip, Jessica, and Lillian described staff as casually overseeing the general well-being of the students, ensuring safety without constant supervision (*safeguard*). Helen explained, “They walked around once in a while to make sure everything was going well,” and Philip added, “[They] watch over you ... even though it's not officially mentioned, but they're there to supervise.”

These responsibilities, while critical to the functioning of the school, did not appear to create a power imbalance or negatively affect student-staff relationships. The participants described staff as integral to the community, and their unequal responsibility did not interfere with their relationships with students or contribute to a sense of authority over students.

They Were People You Could Go to With Questions, Kind of Mentor, Role Model

The participants consistently characterized staff as *unequal in experience*, highlighting their roles as "wiser," "advisers," "role models," and "mentors." Staff members were primarily described as *tools* for students, readily available for help, advice, or conversation. Honest, nonjudgmental feedback was crucial to the participants' education, and the diversity of the staff was valued in providing different perspectives.

Stephen's description captures this role: “They were people you could go to with questions, kind of mentor, role model. Someone you could talk to if you had a problem.” Similarly, eleven other participants referred to staff as approachable resources (*a tool*). Leo described staff as “friends and mentors” and appreciated their non-judgmental attitude, which allowed for a good connection. Claire and Ella both emphasized that staff were always available to help bridge gaps, with Claire stating, “If you want something that you don't quite know how to proceed with ... they are always there to ask for help.”

Beyond seeking advice, some participants, like Suzanne and Rachel, mentioned observing staff as role models. Rachel explained, “Just witnessing them, observing them ... they were my main models for what adults are like.” Others, such as Ted and Suzanne, valued having meaningful conversations with staff, as Ted noted, “You're just talking to [staff] like a friend or acquaintance, a peer ... there's a lot of knowledge that can be gained just from talking to them.”

A key theme across the interviews was that staff did not take over students' responsibilities but facilitated self-determination. Leo explained that staff helped guide students by “leading them to the fork in the road and then letting them go to which path they want.” This approach was echoed by Claire, who emphasized that although students could seek help, “it doesn’t mean they're going to do it for you.”

Participants admired and respected staff for their role in their personal development but made it clear that this relationship involved no power over their choices, unlike traditional school environments. The staff's availability, non-judgmental attitude, and reluctance to take over responsibility fostered students’ autonomy and competency. Ted summarized their availability well: “The bulk of their time was really spent very available to students.” Ella reflected on staff as “educational figures in the most real sense,” underscoring their significant influence on her.

Participants also noted that while staff were more experienced and knowledgeable, they exerted no power over their decisions. Lillian recognized staff as having authority due to their age and experience but clarified that they were “overly cautious ... of being a power figure,” indicating that authority in experience did not translate into decisive power.

These findings align with those from Gray et al. (2021), where staff were frequently described as "facilitators" and "mentors," roles essential in supporting students' development without undermining their autonomy. The “leading to the fork” and “not doing it for you” approach of staff—like Maria Montessori’s pedagogical tools—allowed students to take ownership of their learning and decision-making, further supporting self-determination.

Everything I Have to Do; They Have to Do. Everything They Can Do, I Can Do

Ten participants elaborated on the concept of *equal status* between staff and students within the aged-mixed school community. They emphasized that staff had no special privileges and were bound by the same rules as students, participating equally in the community and activities.

Claire, Suzanne, and Stephen noted little distinction between staff and students, with Marcia adding that she didn't feel the need to look up to staff, and Andrew and Beth expressing a sense of equality in their treatment. Philip described this equality by saying, "Everything I have to do; they have to do. Everything they can do, I can do. They are part of the community; they're an inseparable part."

This sense of equality extended to activities, with Helen, Andrew, and Suzanne describing how staff participated in games and activities just like the students. Helen shared, "Sometimes we would go outside to play a game, and a staff member could join in just as well as students."

Claire and Jessica discussed how this system ensured that staff had no more rights than students, with Jessica stating, "The staff are not exempt from any of the rules that the students have to follow." Similarly, Leo highlighted the equal voting power staff had in decision-making processes, explaining that while staff could offer their opinions, they could not dictate outcomes, "They [the staff members] have an equal vote in the committee [JC] ... He could give his opinion ... but he can't determine what needs to be done."

This equal status reflected a unique dynamic in which staff and students shared the same rights and responsibilities, ensuring that there was no power imbalance in decision-making, rule enforcement, or day-to-day interactions within the school.

They [The Staff] Were Huge Influences, They Felt Like Extended Family

Seven participants described their relationships with school staff as akin to additional parents or family, reflecting a deep *emotional bond*. They emphasized the significant influence staff had on their formative years and, for some, continue to have on their lives today. Ella, who became emotional with tears in her eyes when she said, "They mean so much to me … the staff were and are my friends and additional parents." Similarly, Philip, Marcia, Andrew, Jessica, and Beth also referred to staff as parental figures or likened them to family.

Lillian expressed admiration and respect for the staff, while Ella, Marcia, and Jessica highlighted the significance of staff in their lives. Knowing them well on a personal level was mentioned by Lillian to have been important in building friendly relationships. Ella reflected on the significance of the staff's role,

> In that kind of situation, we were all together in the same environment with all ages, these are the people with the best tools ... to put into words that are helpful things that they see, and they really would do that for us all the time.

This comment underscores the role of staff as experienced mentors (*unequal in experience*), who provided expert feedback as a result of the equal relationship with the student (*equal status*).

Jessica and Marcia mentioned that the staff remains important in their lives. Jessica explained, “They were huge influences, they felt like extended family ... I could definitely reach out to any of them at any point.” This ongoing emotional connection was also shared by Ella, Philip, Marcia, Andrew, Jessica, and Beth, who remained in contact with staff members. Additionally, Leo, Andrew, Ted, and Jessica are still involved with their schools, supporting them in various ways.

Their accounts reflected a high level of appreciation and relatedness toward the adults in the schools. The staff is seen as valuable, supportive persons who have had a lasting impact, continuing to provide guidance and connection well beyond the participants’ school years.

Brief Discussion

From the interviews, it was inferred that the equal status of staff in terms of rights and voting within the community helps maintain equality in power structures at the school. Staff are integral members of the community, sharing in decision-making processes like the JC without supervisory authority over students' behavior or performance, as is common in conventional schools. This framework facilitates the creation of bonds based on trust, akin to peer relationships. While inequality exists in any relationship, the disparity here is based on experience and knowledge rather than power or supremacy.

A key feature of these schools is that educative relationships, including those with staff, are voluntary and can be ended at any time, an option not available in many other educational settings. This voluntary nature forms a foundational aspect of relatedness between students and staff. Staff participate in decision-making as part of the age-mixed community but do not exert control; instead, their influence comes through sharing their experience and wisdom. Their equal voting status ensures they do not have power over students, which enhances their role as mentors, coaches, and role models. This non-judgmental stance, combined with their respect for student autonomy by not taking over responsibility, supports both autonomy and competence development in students. It also promotes relatedness, because of the equality relationship that supports the acceptance of their role as mentor/coach.

None of the participants reported experiencing informal power structures or feeling marginalized, in contrast to the unequal power dynamics uncovered in a Sudbury model school by Wilson (2015). Also research by Von Duyke (2013) into a different type of democratic school, revealed that the founders and staff held dominant (religious) views, which subtly influenced and steered students toward a particular way of thinking. According to Von Duyke, this judgmental attitude undermined students' autonomy and agency, creating a hidden agenda within the perceived freedom of the school. Nonetheless, most studies, including those by Gray et al. (2021) and Morrison (2024), have suggested that staff in most democratic schools, including Sudbury model schools, are generally mindful of their unequal power position and the risks of being judgmental, carefully avoiding directive behavior. This aligns with participants' reflections in this study, where staff were seen as approachable and respectful of students' autonomy.

Findings Part 3 – Experiences With Culture and Effects

In response to questions about the school culture, its impact, and any challenges encountered, two key themes emerged: a non-judgmental culture and a home-like culture. These themes were closely intertwined with the roles of the justice system and the status of adults within

the schools, indicating that the non-judgmental and home-like aspects were integral to how the schools functioned and how relationships were formed.

It Was a Culture of Non-Judgment … It Was an Environment of Acceptance

Seven participants described their school culture as "open," "open-minded," "pleasant," "inviting," or "respectful," directly linking it to a non-judgmental environment. They felt valued, accepted, and free to express themselves without fear of judgment, which positively influenced their self-concept and self-esteem. This non-judgmental culture fostered social engagement, inclusiveness, and personal development, with several participants noting the absence of bullying, discrimination, or exclusion. Ella introduced the concept of a non-judgmental culture by stating, "I think it was a real culture of non-judgment in a way that is totally significant in my life ... It was an environment of acceptance. It wasn't a place where people are trying to condemn each other." This highlights the central role that acceptance and lack of judgment played in shaping her experience within the school community.

Effect on social engagement and interconnectedness. Ella, Helen, Stephen, and Beth emphasized how the non-judgmental culture encouraged social involvement and interaction without limitations based on age, background, or interests. The openness facilitated group activities, initiative-taking, and collaboration. Helen described how initiating an activity would naturally bring together like-minded individuals, saying, "then you would attract those people who were interested in that as well." Suzanne highlighted the impact of this culture, contrasting it with clique formation, saying, "This was just, 'I have a cool idea, come on, do you want to join in?'" This reflects the open and collaborative environment of the school, where students could freely pursue their interests and connect with others who shared similar passions.

Effect on inclusiveness. Ella, Beth, Helen and Suzanne mentioned that the non-judgmental culture reduced bullying, exclusion, and discrimination. Ella and Beth contrasted their school's environment with broader societal and conventional school cultures, with Ella stating that her brother, who attended a Sudbury model school from the beginning, "didn't grow up with bullying and cliques." Beth and Suzanne described how race or appearance did not affect friendships or social dynamics. Beth talked about how being of different race did not play a role in friendships. Helen emphasized, "It didn't matter what you looked like, what you wore. We were all allowed to do our own thing." This atmosphere of respect and tolerance allowed students to be themselves without judgment based on appearance, background, or imperfections.

Effect on self-concept and self-esteem. Beth, Jessica, and Leo discussed how the non-judgmental culture improved their self-concept and self-esteem. Beth, who struggled with confidence before attending the school, explained, "I feel I'm a lot better off going there and having that kind of no judgment." Jessica mentioned that feeling valued taught her to speak up and share her opinions, "It taught me that I'm valuable and that my voice matters even if I don't know all the answers."

Leo, who had been labeled with dyslexia in his previous school, experienced acceptance at his new school. He recalled a powerful moment when he wasn't judged for his poor reading skills during an event he helped organize, saying, "Nobody tried to help me, nobody laughed at me ... They let me be me and that was a very powerful moment for me." This acceptance fostered his self-esteem and competence, giving him the courage to show his vulnerability.

These accounts illustrate the profound impact of a non-judgmental culture on social interaction, inclusiveness, and personal development, with participants highlighting how this environment allowed them to thrive both socially and personally.

You Can Best Describe the Overall Culture as Very Family-Like

Nine participants described the school culture using terms like “intimate,” “inclusive,” “family-like,” and “feeling safe,” reflecting a strong sense of security within the community. Leo, Rachel, and Jessica likened the school culture to that of a large family, with Claire calling it an intimate culture. Claire elaborated on this by stating,

> I think you can best describe the overall culture as very family-like. Everyone knows each other ... There is a lot of respect ... Of course, it sometimes clashes, but you have that everywhere, you have that in your family too.

Jessica similarly noted, “It really did feel like a family in a sense that we had to work out our problems.” Leo emphasized the dynamic of living with different age groups, saying, “The culture is like a big family ... sometimes that little brother annoys you, but in the end you're still a family.” Claire also mentioned that this mixture of ages contributed to a sense of inclusivity.

Marcia and Rachel expressed how the familial culture made them feel safe. Rachel, who had been at the school since she was four, explained, “I felt very, very safe and comfortable at school. I think that meant that I did a lot of exploration because I felt so at home.” This sense of security allowed her to explore, ask questions, and try new things without fear, said, “I wasn't afraid to ask questions or to try something new or to be vulnerable in some way”.

Overall, the participants emphasized that the mix of ages and the intimate, family-like atmosphere fostered a culture of tolerance and emotional bonding, which contributed to their sense of safety and supported self-directed competency development.

Brief Discussion

Participants described a non-judgmental culture in their schools as a culture where they felt accepted and valued, regardless of personal attributes, appearance, background, or skills. This lack of criticism fostered an atmosphere of openness and understanding, contributing to what could broadly be considered a safe environment. The sense of safety allowed individuals to express themselves freely, without fear of rejection or discrimination. Some participants noted that this culture positively impacted their self-concept and self-esteem, with some mentioning lasting effects that extended into their later lives. Leo's experience illustrates this: when he attempted to read aloud and was not judged or assisted, it reinforced his sense of autonomy and competence, contributing to his feeling of belonging.

The non-judgmental culture also facilitated social engagement and strong relatedness, encouraging shared activities and interactions. In addition to this, participants described a family- or home-like culture, which was marked by mutual respect and tolerance, particularly in the context of the school's age-mixed environment. This sense of belonging further supported their ability to show vulnerability, to try new things, and to ask questions without fear of judgement.

In sum, the non-judgmental and home-like culture promoted a sense of agency, and together, it supported their need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

General Discussion

As part of a broader explorative research into the effects of Sudbury Model Schools on the later lives of former students, this study investigated three themes of findings, focusing on effects of a justice system on culture and relationships in Sudbury model schools. Specifically, we focused in this study on the constructs of autonomy and relatedness, analyzing the ways in which these elements interacted to strengthen one another. This inquiry is revisited and further elaborated upon in light of the findings.

The three themes of findings from this study, which examined the experiences of 14 participants from eight Sudbury model schools across three countries, were strongly interconnected. Participants consistently described adults as integral to the mixed-age community, yet their role was defined by unequal responsibility for critical school matters and overall well-being, rather than authority. While adults were part of the inclusive, home-like culture, their influence was not dominant. Their authority derived solely from their knowledge and experience, without unequal decision-making power.

The justice system in these schools played a pivotal role in shaping the non-judgmental and safe culture, reinforcing equality between adults and students who were integral part of the culture. It ensured that adults had no more power than students in decision-making processes, which helped maintain an environment where autonomy, competence, and relatedness is equally supported for all members of the community. These findings illustrate how autonomy and relatedness, as emphasized by SDT, mutually reinforce each other. The non-hierarchical relationships within the community allowed for a high degree of autonomy for students, while also strengthening social bonds and relatedness among all members.

Fostering Inclusivity and Self-Determination: The Role of a Non-Judgmental Culture and Justice System in Sudbury Model Schools

Participants emphasized the justice system's role in fostering inclusivity and non-judgment, where staff and students collaboratively determined resolutions. The formal, structured, and fair nature of this system aligned with RJ practices literature, which highlights the importance of clear rules and fairness for positive outcomes (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Preston & O′Connell, 2005). Participants valued the justice system's focus on relatedness, emphasizing meaningful resolutions over blame. This approach reinforced that while behavior may need change, individuals are not inherently bad.

Blame can lead to extrinsic motivation driven by shame (Deci & Ryan, 2008b). whereas RJ practices promote internalization of values through identification and integration, more autonomous aspects of SDT's motivational continuum (Deci & Ryan, 2008b; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2017). According to SDT, people modify behavior to satisfy competence and relatedness needs, with internalization arising sometimes solely from a desire to belong (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants echoed this, describing the justice system as fostering belonging, where adherence to social norms was motivated by a desire to be part of the community.

Younger students and those transitioning from traditional schools initially struggled to adapt, often resisting authority as the result of an ingrained focus on external control (EPLOC: Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Over time, as they shifted toward autonomous motivation (with an IPLOC), adhering to norms became natural. Reporting peers and adults for

rule violations was part of this transition, reflecting a more internalized sense of responsibility and acceptance of equal relationships with adults. Whether this shift is typical or always successful warrants further research.

Findings suggest that the justice system's structure and fairness supported students' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Engaging with the system fostered a non-judgmental culture, essential for inclusivity and preventing bullying or discrimination, creating a safe environment where students felt valued and respected.

This culture of non-judgment was deeply tied to relatedness, extending across students and adults. In turn, this strengthened autonomy, competence, and self-concept, aligning with Ryan and Deci's (1987, 2017) findings that self-determination enhances intrinsic motivation, trust, and well-being. By removing traditional power dynamics, the justice system fostered fairness while allowing autonomy and relatedness to thrive. This study supports SDT's framework, demonstrating that autonomy and social connection coexist in these schools, shaping a supportive and empowering learning environment.

Equal Authority and Informal Mentorship: Understanding Adult-Student Relationships

In Sudbury model schools, adults are considered equal to students in decision-making, rights, and obligations. Participants highlighted the justice system's role in neutralizing adult authority over behavior, emphasizing the shared responsibility for community norms. Adults were viewed as integral to the community, with authority based on experience and knowledge. The absence of a power hierarchy fostered trust and openness to feedback.

A defining feature of adult roles was their approachability and availability. They spent time engaging in conversations, offering guidance, and modeling behavior, enabling informal, observation-based learning. This non-interference approach, where adults were accessible but left initiative to students, was seen as essential in fostering autonomy and competence (Hartkamp-Bakker & Martens, 2024). Similar findings from anthropology suggest learner-initiated learning occurs through role models and everyday interactions (Lave, 1996, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morelli, 2012; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Rogoff, 2003, 2016).

Participants emphasized that feeling safe and free from judgment was crucial for showing vulnerability and asking questions. The equal status of adults, who did not judge students' behavior or competence, made it easier for students to seek help. Adults acted as mentors, coaches, and role models, providing knowledge and guidance when needed. Ryan et al. (2006) found that individuals in need are more likely to seek support from autonomy-supportive rather than controlling figures.

Unlike formal mentoring programs, mentoring in Sudbury schools emerges organically, aligning with Ragins' (1997, p. 493) concept of "informally developed, voluntary mentoring relationships". These student-initiated connections, built on trust and empathy, tend to be more effective (Inzer & Crawford, 2005; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Research on youth mentoring highlighted the importance of nonjudgmental, nonevaluative relationships centered on mutual trust and support (Rhodes, 2005; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

Findings suggest that the justice system enables adults to maintain authority based on expertise rather than control, fostering trust and approachability in student-adult interactions.

Voluntary and Equal Relationships: Promoting Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Access to diverse role models was crucial for learning and seeking expertise aligned with participants' needs. They emphasized having true choice in selecting mentors, coaches, or role models in the age-mixed environment. Research has shown that the diverse community within these schools, including peers, played a key role in modeling and scaffolding learning (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). We suggest that the equal standing of adults and students supported basic psychological needs through voluntary, trust-based relationships, reinforcing autonomy and competence.

This study distinguishes between authority based on expertise and authority based on control. The latter may disrupt key educational relationships, particularly when adults serve as mentors and role models. Beyond fostering inclusivity and belonging, the justice system in schools without an imposed program, mitigated power imbalances by eliminating the need for adults to evaluate students, allowing for genuine, voluntary relationships. While grades and performance pressures in conventional programs are known to undermine psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009), this study also highlights their role in hindering voluntary, trust-based relationships deemed necessary for self-determination in education.

Neoliberal Critiques

These findings offer important nuance to critiques by Wilson (2015, 2016, 2017) and Hill (2018), who argue that SDE models, including Sudbury schools, risk reproducing neoliberal subjectivities by emphasizing individual responsibility and choice. Rather than being expected to constantly improve or perform, students were accepted as they were, fostering a sense of psychological safety that stood in contrast to performance-driven or competitive cultures. This rejection of conditional worth directly counters the formation of neoliberal subjectivity, which is rooted in individual self-optimization and constant comparison. Reports of bullying or discrimination were notably absent, and social norms were shaped not through imposed authority but through mutual accountability and shared values. In this context, autonomy was not framed as personal achievement or independence from others, but as the freedom to participate authentically within a supportive and equal community, which is central to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This interdependence counters the neoliberal emphasis on self-optimization by emphasizing relational autonomy, mutual responsibility, and emotional safety as preconditions for growth.

Moreover, Hill's concern about the reproduction of privilege in SDE settings is acknowledged through participants' descriptions of initial struggles among students transitioning from conventional systems. These accounts point to the unequal internalization of community norms depending on prior schooling experiences—suggesting that Sudbury environments may not offer equal psychological entry points for all students. Yet the justice system's design—rooted in fairness, non-judgment, and equality—appeared to buffer these inequalities by giving all members a voice and reinforcing inclusion over competition or performance. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this study reflects the perspectives of those who remained in and looked back positively on their time at their Sudbury model school. We do not have accounts from those who may have opted out, struggled more deeply, or had less positive experiences—leaving open the question of how well these systems serve all students, particularly those who do not find belonging within them.

More generally, as Tougas (2024) reminds us, neoliberal values are deeply embedded in Western societies, shaping institutions, relationships, and individual aspirations in subtle and pervasive ways. It would be naïve to suggest that students are untouched by these influences. Sudbury model schools do not claim to offer a utopia removed from society, but rather a space where young people can practice navigating adult life—including its contradictions—in a more intentional, reflective, and egalitarian way (see also Hartkamp-Bakker & Martens, 2024).

In this sense, the findings challenge simplified views of SDE as inherently neoliberal. Instead, they underscore the need to distinguish between autonomy as framed within SDT—relational, needs-based, and psychologically supportive—and autonomy as a neoliberal ideal of individual self-management. These distinctions point to a pressing need for further research that interrogates how different educational contexts operationalize autonomy, and under what conditions it becomes empowering rather than exclusionary.

Limitations and Implications of the Study

The findings indicate that the justice system of Sudbury model schools had important effects on participants' psychological well-being by promoting a culture of inclusivity, non-judgment, and self-direction, alongside fostering equitable relationships. While mentoring was not a primary focus of this study, these elements align with conditions identified in other research as supportive of effective mentoring relationships. The study contributes to discussions on educational change and the successful implementation of RJ models in schools by showing how non-hierarchical approaches can support inclusive, self-directed learning environments. The findings offer a nuanced counterpoint to critiques that Sudbury and other SDE models reproduce neoliberal subjectivities, highlighting how autonomy, when embedded in relational safety and mutual accountability, can foster inclusion rather than self-optimization.

As a limitation, we argue that this study’s sample likely reflects more positive or “successful” cases from Sudbury model schools, as participants self-selected into the research. However, since the focus was not on outcomes but on understanding the schools’ organizational context and its perceived effects, this does not compromise the validity of the findings. Participants came from eight different schools across several countries, offering diverse perspectives that support the exploratory aims of the study. Future research could intentionally seek a broader range of experiences—including more critical or ambivalent voices—to deepen understanding of how different students engage with and are affected by these educational environments.

Another limitation is that participants attended relatively small schools (see Table 1), much smaller than conventional schools but comparable or even much larger in size to typical classrooms. Additionally, five participants had a parent on staff, at least for some years, potentially influencing their emotional bonds with staff. While small school size and parental involvement may have contributed to a family-like sense of security and belonging, participants predominantly attributed these feelings to a culture of respect and non-judgment, reinforced by the justice system. This perspective was shared across participants, regardless of school size or parental ties. One participant without a family connection to staff credited the small school size for fostering friendly relationships, while two with family ties noted that knowing staff through their parents enhanced these bonds. Thus, while school size and family relationships may have played a role, they were assumed not the primary factors in shaping students’ sense of belonging and safety, nor the way they experienced the relationships with significant adults in the school.

Additionally, further research should also explore how school justice systems shape power dynamics over time. Longitudinal studies on student-adult relationships and decision-making could reveal whether shared rights and responsibilities create lasting shifts in authority perceptions. Examining former students' navigation of power structures in higher education and the workforce could clarify the long-term effects of egalitarian education. Addressing these areas would enhance understanding of how democratic schools foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness, informing broader educational reform.

Ultimately, the study offers valuable insights for rethinking authority in schools, promoting trust-based governance, and supporting psychological well-being—while also inviting a more nuanced view of alternative educational approaches.

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From 2020 to 2024, the first author received an unrestricted yearly grant from the Iona Foundation based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The first author is employed at a school that operates under a similar educational model to those examined in this study. Steps were taken to ensure that no personal or external interests influenced the design, conduct, or reporting of the study. The second author declares no competing interests.

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