

Democratic Education: A viable alternative?

Experiences of participating in a Sudbury Model School in Ireland

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC HONESTY:

I declare that the content of this assignment is all my own work. It has not been submitted in respect of any other course/module. Where I have used the work of others it is acknowledged and referenced accordingly.

Abstract

Background

Mainstream education systems are an integral part of modern society, but alternative systems do exist. Prominent amongst these is democratic education, or free education, which has many versions. The version in this study is the Sudbury model of democratic education. Research on this model is very slim, and non-existent in the Irish context.

Aims

To gain an insight into the general experiences of those participating in the Sudbury model.

Methods & Procedures

We carried out interviews with parents and staff of the two Sudbury schools in Ireland, and ran focus groups for students in both schools. We approached this study from an ethnographic perspective, spending time observing, absorbing and sometimes participating in events in the schools. Interviews and focus groups were run using a semi-structured format, with interview schedules as guides. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed and analysed following Thematic Analysis procedures, within a social anthropological framework.

Outcome & Results

Seven main themes emerged during my analysis. I focused on three - deschooling, self-directed learning, and the emotional and psychological effects of participating in the Sudbury model of democratic education - due to their prevalence and salience to my research question. The most important results found were that deschooling is quite a difficult process that most of the students experience; that self-directed learning is the welcome outcome once the deschooling process is complete; that there are substantial emotional and psychological benefits from participating in a Sudbury model school.

Conclusion & Implications

The Sudbury model of democratic education is a viable alternative to mainstream education. Such an alternative could benefit those students who find it difficult to thrive in the results-driven system of mainstream education that is prevalent in Ireland today.

Keywords: democratic education, Sudbury model, deschooling, self-directed learning, emotional and psychological effects

Introduction

“The business of education is not, as I think, to perfect the learner in any of the sciences, but to give his mind that freedom and disposition, and those habits, which may enable him to attain every part of knowledge himself”. (John Locke)

Modern day mainstream education system often appears to be more concerned with achieving the maximum grades possible, than with developing the ability to learn. Huge emphasis is placed on learning by rote, in order to access the highly competitive world of third level education (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008 as cited by Huang, 2014). In the UK, conventional school education has been seen by some to have become a means by which arbitrary pieces of information are drilled into students, objective assessments demonstrate if this information has been absorbed, and test scores drive the ranking of a school (Freire, 2005 as cited by Gibbs, 2018). With such performative pressures, the ability of teachers to be human and to help students and colleagues to be human, is diminished. This has led to many members of school communities being denigrated (Gibbs, 2018).

To help counteract such a development, alternatives to mainstream education have evolved throughout the last century or so. Examples of such alternatives are Montessori schools, Steiner/Waldorf schools, the Harkness method and democratic schools. This study focuses on democratic education - in particular the Sudbury model of democratic education. The aim of my study is to explore the experiences of those participating in Sudbury schools in Ireland.

Democratic Education – key characteristics

Democratic education has three main characteristics:

1. Self-directed learning/personal responsibility. There are no compulsory lessons, exams or externally assessed achievement targets. Students are free to decide how they spend their time at school within the confines of any rules which have been decided by the whole school, and the law of the land. In democratic schools, students are free in an educational sense (Huang, 2014).
2. Mixed-age association. All members of the school mix freely with each other. Learning is seen as multi-directional, where younger students learn from older

students and staff, older students learn from younger students and staff, and staff learn from all students.

3. Open decision-making/egalitarianism. The school is run as a democracy, where everyone – staff and students alike – has an equal vote. Regular school meetings are held where there is the opportunity to put forward a proposal, to get it seconded and put on the agenda for the next meeting, where it is discussed and voted on.

Brief History

In 1921, A.S. Neill opened the well-known “Summerhill” school in England (which is still running today). It was the first democratic school to be founded, and was a “self-governing school, democratic in form” (Neill, 1968 as cited by Darling, 1992). In 1927, Beacon Hill School was opened in the UK by Bertrand and Dora Russell, with democracy as its underlying principle. Democracy was seen as a way of defining a child as unique, belonging not to their parents or to the State, but to themselves (Russell, 1980 as cited by Gorham, 2005). Both of these schools were part of an international movement for progressive education, which had begun at the end of the 19th century, with people such as John Dewey, Dr. Maria Montessori., and Janusz Korczak, all of whom acknowledged the influence of earlier educational thinkers Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel (Lightfoot, 1952 as cited by Gorham, 2005).

In 2006, EUDEC (European Democratic Education Community) was formed (<https://www.eudec.org>). It is a not-for-profit organisation which supports and promotes democratic education in Europe “as a sensible educational model for all democratic states.” It facilitates networking amongst interested people, schools and institutions, in developing and promoting democratic education initiatives.

The Sudbury model of democratic education derives its name from the Sudbury Valley School, which was established in the US in 1968, and is still in existence today. It has neither a curriculum nor fixed classes, even though students can request tuition in a specific area (Oppenheimer, 2014). In September 2016, the first Irish Sudbury model school was founded (Wicklow Sudbury School). It consists of 27 students and 5 staff members. In September 2018 the Sligo Sudbury School

opened in Co. Sligo, in a detached property which was previously the local national school. It has 14 students and 8 staff members. The Sudbury model is becoming more popular in Ireland, with a new school scheduled to be opened in Galway in September 2019, followed by more schools opening in West Cork and Cork City. Members of the Sudbury community include adults with varied backgrounds, each one serving as a potential role model and guide for the developing child (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Greenberg (n.d.) describes Sudbury schools as providing children with the same privileges, rights and responsibilities as adults. Another crucial concept is open decision making and egalitarianism. Governed as a working democracy, Sudbury schools have a School Meeting and a Judicial Committee, with each member of the school having one vote each – students and staff alike (Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

Characteristics of potential students

In theory, a Sudbury school is open to everybody except those who do not want to be at the school. Children learn to be tolerant, considerate and self-confident when given space to be themselves (“Summerhill – an Overview”, n.d.). Even though there are not any entrance requirements for Sudbury schools, just a self-selected few decide to enrol. Most of the entrants are from middle-class homes (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Some of the students enrolling at Sudbury schools have previously experienced serious school problems. The parental decision to enrol their child in a Sudbury school can sometimes be a combination of a belief in the educational philosophy of the school and a previous school problem experienced elsewhere. Perhaps issues with mainstream schooling were due to the children being dispositionally resistant to authority, and oriented more towards self-control. Such dispositions may be innate or may result from home environments that are non-authoritarian. If this is the case, maybe the Sudbury model is not suitable for everyone - only for children with a certain disposition, a desire to control their own education (Gray and Chanoff, 1986). To help all parties concerned establish whether the school is suitable for a new entrant, there is a compulsory trial period, where the potential student attends Sudbury for two weeks, before the final decision is made.

Self-directed learning/ Personal Responsibility

Descriptions of Sudbury schools are easily found on websites such as sudburyvalley.org, wicklowsudburyschool.com, and sligosudburyschool.com. The following information regarding the Sudbury model is based on those descriptions. There are no demands academically – the student is encouraged to use their own initiative to learn. The underlying pedagogy is that learning is self-directed, but scaffolded. It is up to the student themselves to determine what, when, where and how to learn, if at all, but staff support is always available. Learning is almost seen as something that happens by accident, as a by-product of being involved in a project, a game or a conversation that interests the student. Sometimes an interest can be all-encompassing where the student is totally immersed in their activity such as computer programming, playing the piano or reading all they can on a particular topic that is interesting them. Staff engagement usually occurs informally through conversations or answering questions. However more formal engagement can also occur where students have expressed a desire to pursue a topic in a systematic manner with a member of staff, and so a tutorial or a course is organised. The decision to strategically follow a specific plan towards an end career goal, or simply do whatever they feel like doing at that particular moment, is left to the student. Students tend to feel motivated towards continuing learning – they have a curiosity and positive attitude towards learning in general, and a sense of personal responsibility for their own education. This self-directed learning and self-regulation helps them excel in college, where close monitoring by staff does not take place. A core principle at the centre of democratic educational philosophy is the concept of personal responsibility. It is up to each student to discover or generate their own areas of interest, to set their own goals for themselves, and decide on strategies necessary to pursue those goals. They must also monitor their own progress, and establish how well they are progressing (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Children have an innate strong drive to acquire the knowledge, skills and values relevant to the culture they are part of (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). Such self-initiated learning is very much facilitated by one of the major tools of 21st century life – the computer, due to its limitless opportunities for discovery and exploration (Novak, 2011). Trusting children and believing they are free human beings is the basis for letting them decide, for themselves, what they want to learn, and when and how they want to learn it. This responsibility allows the

students to become empowered at an early age, having “real world” practice which helps them to develop into adults who are experts at handling responsibility (Sudbury Valley School, 2009 as cited by Huang, 2014). Democratic education’s philosophy is based on Aristotle’s argument that all humans are naturally curious. It believes that learning is part and parcel of life, that learning is better when people are self-motivated, and not motivated by external influences or incentives. This type of learning is known as student initiated learning and is apparent in early child development where babies struggle to walk and talk but persevere until they are successful. This inherent motivation for learning and developing does not stop at school age, according to democratic education philosophy (Collins, 2006). This philosophy also claims that children learn all they need, and more, once they are left to be themselves. There is no distinction in democratic schools between learning and fun, or work and play (Greenberg, 1995 as cited by Huang, 2014).

Mixed-age association

A distinguishing characteristic of democratic education is that people of all ages are free to associate with one another. Groups which have gathered for sports, games, classes or just conversation can sometimes constitute chronological peers, but usually contains a mix of ages. This leads to improved interactions with authority figures and improved learning, as a result of lack of fear of communicating with people of all ages from a young age. The ease with which students deal with authority figures is also an asset in the workplace (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). The fact that students of all ages interact with adults, without seeing them as authorities or being afraid of them, is seen as an excellent way of practicing leadership (Mercogliano, 1998, as cited by Huang, 2014). It encourages the development of self-esteem while at the same time students learn to be sensitive towards the needs of others and become aware of their own behaviour while talking to others (Huang, 2014). The social side of students of different ages mixing is very important as the older students are seen as role models by the younger students, or vice versa (Sudbury Valley School, 2009, as cited by Huang, 2014). This notion corresponds to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. Also, the attention given by all present at the school meetings, big and small, to when even the smallest child speaks, must be amazing for the child, and a real boost to their self-confidence (Piper, 2009).

Judicial Committee

As the Judicial Committee is responsible for ensuring that the laws and policies of the school meetings are followed, every student and staff member is required to serve on the Judicial Committee at some stage. The Judicial Committee has worked in democratic education as an efficient means for solving conflicts. Due to the students being as involved as the staff in making school decisions, they subsequently have to deal with any real conflicts that may arise as a result of these decisions (Collins, 2006 as cited by Huang, 2014). Resilience is a relationship between a person and their environment – it is a combination of a person's capacity to access necessary resources, and their community in providing such resources (Unger, 2008). This exposure to conflict, and its resolution, may help the students improve their levels of resilience.

Life after democratic education

A challenge for parents contemplating sending their child to a Sudbury school is the fear of the unknown – they may not find conventional schooling appealing, but at least they know what it entails. Regardless of one's belief in the democratic values of such an education, no-one wants their child to be unprepared for an effective and fulfilling adult life (Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

A common sense hypothesis surrounding democratic education is that it will be difficult for those who have had a democratic education to integrate into society after they have finished school - they may find the petty, hierarchical nature of many work environments difficult to accept, and they may find the formal nature of third level education, with its requisite exams and assignment deadlines, difficult to adhere to. Such a hypothesis though, is not supported by evidence. In their 1986 study looking at outcomes for democratic education graduates, Gray & Chanoff found that a lot of the graduates were employed in jobs which really interested them. This may be due to the fact that Democratic education produces people who not only feel in control of their lives, but also have the courage to follow their own interests (Cassidy, 2011). The 1986 study also found that, in general, the graduates were very enthusiastic about their work, and experienced flow – defined as being involved in a highly absorbing and challenging activity, whilst experiencing absorption, intense concentration and focus (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990 as cited in Butler and Kern, 2016).

Both Gray & Chanoff (1986) and Sadofsky (2014) emphasise that the skills they documented in Sudbury graduates – problem solving, personal responsibility, effective communication, self-empowerment, internal locus of control, and confidence in dealing with authority figures – are precisely those skills that may be very relevant to the 21st century job market. In terms of attending college, Gray & Chanoff (1986) found that some students of the original Sudbury school did indeed find the concept of third level education intimidating because they believed it to be so different from what they were used to, but that the majority of the graduates believed democratic education provided them with more advantages than disadvantages in terms of further education. They may have felt themselves disadvantaged initially in certain areas, but they all felt they were at an advantage when it came to their attitude, and the structured formality of college did not concern them - they were in college because they chose to be there, they had taken on board the fact that assignments and tests were part of the package, and they found communicating with their college professors easy and natural.

Research Questions

During the course of doing this literature review, I became aware that research on the process and outcomes of democratic education is sparse, and completely non-existent in the Irish context. For me, the assumption was that most people attend mainstream education, so I was interested in knowing the reasons why a child would go to a Sudbury school instead. Had something happened for this decision to be made, had they had a negative experience, or was it an allegiance to the democratic philosophy underpinning the education system that resulted in them being students there? How was the decision to attend working out for them? For the parents of prospective students, I felt it would be useful to know what the advantages and disadvantages of attending a Sudbury school would be. Also, was the decision, from a parental point of view, concerned with their child receiving a better education, or was it concerned with their child developing into a more well-rounded, happier person, with a higher level of positive well-being, than if they stayed in mainstream education, or home-schooling. I also wanted to know if the model was an inclusive model – did it cater for students with special needs? I also wanted to look at the future prospects for students in a Sudbury school – was third level education closed off to

them until they could access it as mature students? There were so many unknowns that I felt my study should try to address some of the gaps in information. This general quest for knowledge about the Sudbury model led me to formulating the following research questions:

For Students:

1. Why are you attending a democratic school?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of attending this type of school?

For Staff:

1. How have you found the whole experience of working in a Sudbury school?
2. How does the system cater for students with special needs?

For Parents:

1. What were the factors underlying the decision to send your child to a Sudbury school?
2. Are there any concerns about your child's future because they follow such an unusual educational path?

For All:

1. What are the likely mental health effects of receiving a democratic education?

However, through the process of doing this research, a lot of data was collected - not only data pertaining to these particular questions, but other very rich data as well. Such data collection resulted in me eventually amalgamating the initial questions into one over-riding research question: What are the experiences of participating in a Sudbury Model School in Ireland?

General Methodological Approach

This study was carried out using participant observation (informed by social anthropology), combined with interviews, focus groups and questionnaires.

Method

Methodology

As the aim of my study was to explore the experience of participating in a Sudbury model of democratic education, I felt it would be best to use a variety of techniques to access this information. The methodology of this study was informed by social anthropology (Evans-Pritchard, 1972).

The methods used were as follows:

- Interviewing staff members - mostly consisting of my fellow researcher (Susana Espana Lara) and me interviewing one staff member at a time
- Interviewing parents individually by the two of us together
- Focus groups for students
- Participating in a well-being meeting
- Observing school meetings
- Observing a Judicial Committee meeting
- Observing everyday events
- Completion of questionnaires by parents, which were sent to them by email

All of the interviews and focus groups were carried out using a semi-structured format. We used interview schedules as guides for the interviews, the questions being generated using face validity (Appendix I). A different interview schedule was used for each school's focus group, due to the different age groups involved – 12 to 16 in Wicklow, 5 to 12 in Sligo. The purpose of semi-structured interviews was to allow enough flexibility for the participants to introduce topics not anticipated by us, whilst at the same time allowing us to control the general direction of the interviews. Each of the interviews was recorded using encrypted recording devices. The recordings were then uploaded onto our own laptops, transcribed and analysed separately.

Researchers and their positionality

Positionality, in qualitative research, refers to how one's identity and biases can influence one's approach to the research, and that in order to obtain greater objectivity, reflexivity of one's emotions and world views is crucial (McHugh, 2014 as cited by Keikelame, 2018). Positionality can be managed by an on-going process of

self-reflection (Ryan, 2015). In our study, the research team consisted of Susana Espana Lara and me undertaking all of the research together. We are both final year students of a BA in Applied Psychology and a Higher Diploma in Applied Psychology respectively, in UCC, and our supervisor is a lecturer in the School of Applied Psychology in UCC. The three of us have all attended mainstream schools. Susana was interested in the different experiences of students who had attended both mainstream schools and Sudbury schools, whilst I was interested in the general experience of being a part of the Sudbury model of democratic education, be it as a student, a parent, or a staff member. We both had a prior interest in alternative education - Susana with families who travel, live in their cars, and educate their children; me with home-schooling. I approached this study with a very positive attitude towards democratic schooling in general. The sense of freedom that it seems to bestow on children really appealed to me, and I felt it could be a very rewarding experience for a child.

The Setting

Wicklow Sudbury School is now in its third year of existence. It was founded by a group of community-spirited parents, some of whom were very keen to find an alternative to the mainstream education which their children were having difficulties with. At present the school is in a detached rented house, in the tiny village of Kilpedder. Its front garden has a lovely bohemian feel to it, whilst the back garden is used for playing sports. The school has become too large for the house, so at the time of writing, a new premises was being sought. The hub of the school definitely seems to be the kitchen, and tends to be the first port of call as students arrive in the school every day. Sligo Sudbury School is in its first year of existence. It was founded by two parents who had previously home-schooled, but had felt that their children would benefit from the social aspect of being in a school, without the restriction usually found in a mainstream school. The school building had originally been the local national school but had closed in the 1950s. The school has been restored, and has a lovely big kitchen, where staff, rather than students, tend to gather – other than at meal times when children participate in a cooking rota as can be seen in Figure 1, and come to eat at the large table every day for lunch. The school is situated in a very remote area, surrounded by beautiful large trees, and a lovely big garden.



Figure 1. Three younger students helping make lunch in Sligo. February 14, 2019.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used whereby students, staff and parents in the two schools were approached on the basis of being a part of the only two Sudbury schools currently in Ireland. Those who returned a signed informed consent sheet became participants in our study.

The participants fell into three groups:

- Students ranging in age from 10 – 16 in Wicklow (9 boys and 5 girls), and 5 – 12 in Sligo (3 boys and 3 girls) (See Table 1)
- Staff: 5 in Wicklow (one female, four male), and 5 in Sligo (four female, one male)
- Parents (three parents were interviewed; two parents returned questionnaires)

Before each staff and parent interview, each participant was given an information sheet again, explaining the purpose of the study. Once read, the participant was requested to provide informed consent by signing the consent sheet. For the focus groups we checked that all students present had provided both parental and student consent forms.

As we did not ask specific questions regarding the socio-economic background of each student, I do not know definitively what it is. However my impression was that most of the students that we met seemed to come from a similar socio-economic background, which was middle-class and alternative. This assumption is based on my observations of the students interacting with each other, the fact that both schools are fee-paying, and the comments of some students that their parents were artists.

Table 1

Descriptions of Age and Gender in Both Schools ■ = participants in our study

Wicklow				Sligo			
Name	Age	Prev Education	Gender	Name	Age	Prev Education	Gender
Maura	17	unknown	f	Keelynn	14	unknown	f
Felix	16	mainstream	m	Olan	12	mainstream	m
Frank	16	mainstream	m	Senan	12	home-school	m
Len	16	mainstream	m	Linda	11	unknown	f
Noah	16	mainstream	m	Chris	10	mainstream	m
Karla	16	mainstream	f	Luan	10	unknown	m
Ines	16	unknown	f	Liadh	10	mainstream	f
Iris	16	unknown	f	Foster	9	unknown	m
Elijah	15	mainstream	m	Louis	8	home-school	m
Joanne	15	mainstream	f	Chloe	7	mainstream	f
Kitty	15	home-school	f	Ezra	7	unknown	m
Shirley	14	unknown	f	Seb	7	unknown	m
George	13	unknown	m	Audrey	5	playschool	f
Jack	13	mainstream	m	Duke	5	unknown	m
Ollie	13	unknown	m				
Lewis	12	mainstream	m				
Andy	11	unknown	m				
Bobby	11	unknown	m				
Ernie	11	unknown	m				
Fiadh	11	unknown	f				
Fachtna	10	mainstream	m				
Fred	10	mainstream	m				
Lucy	9	unknown	f				
Sam	9	unknown	m				
Bertie	8	unknown	m				
Eoin	8	unknown	m				
Lulu	7	unknown	g				

Procedure

Our research took place in the two Sudbury Schools currently in existence in Ireland, namely the Wicklow Sudbury School, and the Sligo Sudbury School. Both communities were visited for a period of 3 days at a time (Wednesday to Friday), with the Wicklow school also being visited for a one-day introduction presentation, in advance of the study. For both school visits, Susana and I stayed in accommodation near the schools, and visited the schools from 10.30 to 3.30 approximately, on each of the three days. Initial contact was made with the two schools via an email from our supervisor, who had met the founders of both schools previously. These introductory emails included a letter from Susana and me, which gave a brief outline of our research study (Appendix II). We had an introductory day in Wicklow Sudbury, in October 2018, to give a clearer idea of what we were hoping to achieve. We met some of the students and staff that day, and made a short informal presentation to them, outlining what our study would entail. Our study was approved by the school meeting and information sheets and consent forms were subsequently given (via the school contact) to staff, parents and students (Appendix III). We were also accepted by Sligo Sudbury at this stage. We slightly adapted the information sheets and consent sheets and sent them off to Sligo Sudbury. Susana and I visited Wicklow Sudbury in January, and Sligo Sudbury in February, to carry out our study. On the final day of our visit to both schools, we were joined by our supervisor who shadowed us for those two days.

Once informed consent had been received, the interviews/focus groups began. We used the interview schedules as loose guides for us to follow. At the end of the interviews, we thanked the participants. The audio recordings of the interviews were later uploaded to our laptops, and the recordings were deleted from the recording device.

We participated in the first part of the weekly well-being meeting. We also sat in on school meetings in both schools, and in a Judicial Committee meeting in Wicklow Sudbury, where, even though we were observers, we were able to ask some questions at the end, to clarify the procedures we had observed.

Ethics

A Full Ethics Application Form was completed for this study (Appendix IV). It was then submitted to the Ethics Board in UCC for approval. Qualified approval was provided initially, subject to certain clarifications being provided, which they were. Full approval was then given in line with the Psychological Society of Ireland's Code of Professional Ethics (2010). The participants took part in the study without coercion or monetary reward. Although the two schools in the study have been named, pseudonyms were used to disguise the identity of the participants, and any identifying information was either removed or manipulated to prevent the participants from being identified.

Analysis

All of our data collection was carried out within an ethnographic framework. Seven themes emerged:

- Deschooling
- Self-directed learning
- Emotional and psychological effects of partaking in democratic education
- Mixed age learning
- Managing special needs
- Further education prospects
- Advantages/disadvantages to this type of schooling

However, due to the word constraints of my Final Year Project Report, I decided to focus on the first three themes of deschooling, self-directed learning, and emotional and psychologic effects of partaking in democratic education. I made this choice based on the richness of relevant data available to me, my own interest in those specific areas, and the salience of those themes to my research question concerning people's experiences of democratic education.

Deschooling

I first encountered the term deschooling in the initial focus group with students in Wicklow. Even though I had never heard of the term before, it seemed to be a term familiar to all the students present. Subsequently the term cropped up repeatedly when speaking to staff, in both Wicklow and Sligo, and with some of the parents as well. Deschooling - a term commonly attributed to the educational philosopher Ivan Illich - is the process of transitioning from a highly regulated and restricted education system to one where the focus is self-directed education (Illich, 1971, as cited by Bruno-Jofré & Zaldívar, 2012). From a student's point of view, deschooling involves shaking off their earlier experiences of education, and adapting to life in a Sudbury school, which does not have any imposed structure – no-one is telling them what to do or when to do it by. For the most part, this earlier educational experience was mainstream education. Some staff members also appeared to experience something similar to deschooling when they initially joined the school. They had to adapt to an environment where they model behavior to students rather than teach students. For many of the students involved in our study, deschooling was a difficult process. A lot of them were still

experiencing it, whilst others felt they had been through it, and were now out the other side. For some students the transition was short. Frank (16) who has been in the school for a year had a very negative experience of mainstream education, and was described by Rachel (his mother) as “remembering himself” once he joined the Sudbury School. Frank:

“And it took me only like a few weeks to sorta get into it, I guess - a few weeks to kind of take off the mask that I had on before from secondary school. Ehm, but it certainly took a while to adjust, because it was so unbelievably different from mainstream.”

A fellow student (Felix - 16) recalls Frank’s early days:

“I remember when you first came in, there was quite a few days towards the beginning where you came in and you sat on the couch or whatever, and you used your iPad and you’d be offered to do stuff, but you were content in using your iPad, which wasn’t a bad thing. But from then to now, it’s a huge change in person, sort of everything.”

Felix’s transition took longer. He had attended mainstream school until the end of second year of secondary school, and then joined the school a year and a half ago. The lack of structure in the school seemed to result in a sense of inertia initially:

“I think it was really overwhelming straight away. I came in and I had a list over ... 50 things I wanted to do and complete... so I did nothing (laughs). Ehm, and I think, ... it’s called deschooling. How you need to kinda unlearn the way you’ve done things your whole life and so you can relearn how to do things your own way, however that is... It’s a long process to unlearn something you’re so used to... But I think one of the important skills I’ve tried to learn is being comfortable doing nothing, because sometimes that’s what you need and... like sometimes the hardest thing in doing something is starting. So, if I have a list of 50 things I want to do, just do one of them. And even if I don’t complete that one thing, at least I’ve done something in that day...”

Karla (16) joined the school 3 months earlier. She had been in mainstream education all her life, and had tried two or three different mainstream schools. Part of her deschooling process was connected to a fear for her future. She described how support from staff helped ease the transition and helped her develop a sense of empowerment:

“But one negative thing is that ... when you come here, you really like jump into the deep end of the pool. Like I did not expect it was going to be like this where it’s just no structure... I remember the first day I got here; I was like “oh cool yeah”. The first week I was like “yeah I got this” and the second week absolute nose-dive (laughs). I was such an emotional wreck... there’s nothing you can hold onto. Eh, but in the long run it’s good, but eh it was scary at first. And coming here, obviously so much doubt in my mind. Like, “I’ve made the wrong choice... I’m not really set up for life... I’m going to be a complete loser” (all laugh). And staff members are amazing in the way that they support you, and they kind of push you in a way to get your own engine running, to do it yourself. So that’s something that I hadn’t experienced before like I came here.”

Elijah (15) has been a student in the school since it opened. His previous educational experience was in mainstream education, where he was extremely unhappy. He found the transition a little easier than others, and attributes that to supportive adults in his life who trusted him to be self-directed. He stressed the importance of parents taking a “leap of faith” in terms of trusting their child to the system:

“I think it’s something that every Sudbury, self-directed student experiences at some point... you’ve been going through your entire life and numerous years of mainstream school. And you’re part of the society as well that gives you this pressure to do something worthwhile or productive. It took me about a year to really start doing things that ehm that I felt productive doing. But it ... wasn’t a hard year. I didn’t struggle necessarily because at no point throughout that year did I feel the pressure from anyone, like any adults in my life, or any people in general, to be doing something more than just being, and being me, and doing whatever I need to do... a big part of going to a Sudbury school is, there’s a big responsibility on the parents to trust, to really 100% trust their child enough to direct themselves and to make that leap of faith...”

Joanne (15) started in the school four months earlier. She had previously been in mainstream education and had completed 2nd year in Secondary School. She had found the academic side of mainstream school easy, but had struggled with the social side, which had spurred her to make the decision to join the school. She feels her difficulties during the transition period are more down to herself, rather than anyone else (unlike what Elijah was suggesting regarding external pressure). Unlike Karla, Joanne's deschooling was more to do with uncertainty as to what to do now, rather than a fear for her future. She had already decided, at the time of this interview, not to do her Leaving Cert, but she seems to feel a weight of responsibility about being in control of her life. She describes her transition as follows:

"I went through quite a depressive period of being in the school, not doing anything in the school, and then not doing anything at home... feeling really terrible because I wasn't doing anything. My brain needs activities and needs to be doing things. And I felt like it wasn't working for me and that I wanted to move actually again. And then I had a long conversation with two of our staff members, about like motivation and... [I realised] if I wanted to do something, I could just do it. It wasn't fear either, cos I've always, always had a plan in mind. So not doing the Leaving Cert didn't really affect that plan... the whole thing for me was the in-between moments. It was scary. It was frightening to be in an environment that you basically own your own destiny. Like you're not following the same path as every other student doing the Leaving Cert. You're doing it your own way. It was so much more difficult and it still is, being in this place, because of the way it works, because of the way we've been doing school for so many years."

From a staff point of view, the deschooling process is something that is witnessed quite often. Louise, who has been a Wicklow staff member for two years, notes how the responsibility to make your own choices can be difficult for the younger students:

"Some younger students find it particularly difficult coming in here cos... they have to make their own choices, and they're not being told what to do."

However, I did observe that at one stage a younger student was reminded by a staff member not to forget to have his lunch, which seemed to go against this principle a little. Brian, a staff member who has been at the Wicklow school since it opened, feels

that once the initial euphoria fades for a student, anxiety can creep in around their new-found freedom. That's when staff need to step in and help the student get through the process:

"I think typically people come in, and their initial reaction 80% of the time maybe is "oh this is great" because all the pressure that was on them comes off and they can just breathe... ehm and that's really enjoyable, and making friends and being able to just kind of feel their personality coming back. But after a while... there's a period maybe of listlessness, of "Ok, but what do I do now with all this freedom?" And it's kind of like choice. Choice overwhelms. And that's where the role of staff I think is ... important because that's where you have to have like, those conversations. Like people will come and say "Ehm, I want to get off. I don't want to come to this school anymore. I feel like I'm lacking direction". It's important to hear between the lines what the person is saying to you, because a lot of the time it is just "I need to find some direction, I need to find some purpose". In traditional school, you might not like the purpose that is assigned to you, but you're given a purpose. Here you're kind of unpacking all the beliefs that society has fed you that your work is only important if it's being graded by a teacher. And then once people have had those conversations and they kind of grasp that, then they're up and away. You'd be kind of jealous of them then like. You'd be saying "Oh, I could have been like that" (laughs)."

Rob, who has been at the Wicklow school for three months, feels, like Louise, that although the unstructured nature of this education can be anxiety-provoking initially, once it has been mastered, it is a huge life-skill to learn:

*"It is quite a challenge to have no... prescribed structure for you so you need to find your own way, especially if they are coming from a structured environment - structure brings a bit of security to it. I imagine it brings an element of anxiety - nobody is telling me what to do or setting it up for me to do. I don't see that as a negative, and after when you find your ground, you've found it. Which is a **huge, huge, huge** asset to have for your whole life."*

For some staff in both of the schools, there was also a type of deschooling that they themselves experienced in coming to work in the school. Mike noted that he can sometimes struggle with the somewhat “passive” nature of being a staff member in a Sudbury School:

“The philosophy behind Sudbury has been a little tough for me to get around... trying to not initiate things as much and finding out ways [to] maybe role-modelling my passions rather than saying “let’s go do this, let’s go do that”. So that’s been an adjustment to... either join something that’s happening or to just completely stay out of it, and let it just evolve as it does.”

Rob found the initial stages difficult, but recognised that the experience helped him empathise more with the students:

“The first while was quite hard because there was nothing for me to do per se... I was just in the kitchen hanging out (laughs). It was very interesting, because I was aware... even though I knew my role was kind of facilitating, it was to model, it was more about being than doing, it was difficult because my brain was like “what are my responsibilities? What are my tasks?” And they weren’t there. So, I imagine it is the same for the students when they come, so it was really good for me to get a taste of that.”

Colman, a volunteer in the Sligo school, described the learning curve he went through in clarifying his role as a staff member:

“At first I was trying to entertain the young kids, and then realising that’s not what the school is about. Let them get bored and stuff and figure out their own things to do, not just be a clown for them. It was more about stepping back and being there for them. Really you don’t have to provide an activity for them to do.”

On our initial day visit to Wicklow school, I felt some of the anxiety that a staff member might feel. I felt a little in the way, with nothing in particular to do. My official task of “observing” seemed a little vague to me. On the subsequent visit to Wicklow though, and on the visit to Sligo as well, the whole experience seemed easier. Maybe I was more familiar with the ethos of Sudbury schooling at that stage, and was happier to sit around and try and absorb and observe the environment.

Some of the parents referred to the deschooling process. Rachel (parent of boy and girl – 16 and 15) recalls her daughter's experience:

“She was coming up against a wall. She was like “I don't know what I am doing, kind of flatlining a little bit and a lot of nothing, and a lot of watching Netflix at home and a lot of...” I got to do this assignment, I got to do that assignment”, you know, there was a lot of that going on. Her journey wasn't instant, it was more slow..”

Jane (parent of 2 girls, 7 and 5) experienced something of the “leap of faith” that Elijah referred to, which she relays in her description of the deschooling process that she and her daughters went through:

*“And even though it was a huge yes initially, I still had to work through all my own conditioning, which was still clearly there, around “oh my God, are my children going to learn anything? What if they don't? Will they be able to read?” All that sort of stuff. And then it was just taking a deep breath and saying “trust, trust.” So again, it's just been a process of trust and observing how the girls have settled into the school since September. They struggled a little with the lack of structure, but again it's the trusting process. Allow them to struggle a little, because it's only by doing that, that they find the resources they need, if that's what's going to happen. So, it feels like a really critical and natural phase, kind of not knowing what to do with the lack of structure. There was an impulse for me to intervene. But I said “no, just trust it, trust this process.” You know this model has been around for 50 years now, so we've got to let it breathe and let them breathe. I mean as a parent, that's **huge** to be able to step back, and **keep** stepping back. But she struggled a lot with just missing her friends, especially. And there were things she liked about her former school, and I think she grieves for that. And I think she grieves for the formal structure as well.”*

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is one of the main tenets of democratic education, and is a key factor distinguishing it from mainstream education. Self-directed learning is a

process where individuals take the initiative in assessing their own learning needs, establishing learning goals, identifying learning resources, formulating and using relevant learning strategies, and evaluating their own learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975 as cited by Yan, 2018). During our interviews, it became clear that the whole ethos of self-directed learning seemed to play a vital role in people's participation in democratic education.

Jane (parent) discusses how the self-directed learning element of the Sudbury philosophy was essential in her decision to send her children to the school:

“What appears to be the radical idea for children to elicit their own way of learning and be attracted to whatever they want to learn, and to learn it... so it seemed really congruent to find a model, or a space where that was nurtured and was an essential part of the model from the beginning, in terms of education... Audrey (5) is reading now and writing, with very little formal instruction.”

For Mike (staff), the self-directed learning nature of Sudbury really appealed to him, and has influenced his relationship with his daughter:

“Sudbury... really sounded like it would be something that would fit for me – working with people as who they are and how they are versus giving them a set structure or curriculum... I have a 2 year old daughter, and I definitely feel with how I'm interacting with her, it's been changing a little bit for how things are here, letting her work out things a little bit more. Just giving her space for what she wants to do and be....”

Mairead, a founding member of the Sligo school, sees self-directed learning as a core aspect of her engagement with the Sudbury model:

“The children can really follow who they are, their own rhythms, patterns and interests. Every child is on their own path developmentally and so they can do things as they are ready and interested. They have the time to spend as long as they want on that activity before they move onto something else, just like a child starts to walk when they're ready... For me that's one of the biggest advantages of here... I don't think there's a child who's not interested in learning something. They may not be interested in learning what you're trying

to teach them. They may go through an intense phase of wanting to play [video] games, and then exhaust it... and once they get everything they need from that they move on... Kids will nearly always choose society and outside, to the screen. Kids only become in an unhealthy way with screens, when they don't have access to those relationships and those other forms of play that they all enjoy."

Frank (16) echoes Mairead's interpretation of unhealthy relationships with screens. He refers to the misconception that self-directed learning is about playing video games all day. He makes the point that being a student at Sudbury helped him cure his own addiction:

"[Before Sudbury] I played an ungodly amount [of video games] and it was like my only thing and... I wouldn't admit it but it was a total addiction to them because I hadn't played them not even having fun, I would just play them, because my 3 closest friends, they weren't really much friends, but they were the only thing I had. [Whereas now] I haven't touched video games in, I don't know, like 3 months probably."

Some people saw self-directed learning as being a natural process.

Ines (staff):

"Education is not something that is served to you from someone lecturing. It's something that has to come from within yourself and children are naturally curious and they want to learn. So they'll go and follow their interests and learn that way."

Karina (staff):

"I think [here is] more like the way people naturally learn, and not like eh kind of, just something we've made up to try to get people to learn. It's how people follow their passions in life... in the society that we have, this is the closest that we can get to nature, like the days when you'd have been with your parents and learned from them and the community."

Others saw a link between self-directed learning and independence.

Caoimhe (staff):

“They’re in charge of their own learning, of their own time management. If they want something, they can speak up, and they can make it happen... I was always into fostering their own independence... So now the younger ones are coming with workbooks, and we take time with them. There’s a 6 year old who only in the last few weeks is showing an interest, so now is the prime time... There are workbooks and material there, and if they’re interested, they go over and take out the young reader books. So it’s not formal, it’s definitely organic.”

Cora, a volunteer at the Sligo school:

“Just figuring things out for themselves, and what they’re interested in, and not being spoon-fed... We don’t need to do things for children, because they’re well used to doing things for themselves.”

Factors affecting self-directed learning.

The ability to engage in self-directed learning is affected both by the external characteristics of a learning system (Brockett et al, 1991 as cited by Yan, 2018), and by the attributes and individual differences of students (Tough, 1971, as cited by Clardy, 2000). Some of the structural features of the Sudbury model which help facilitate self-directed learning are the lack of compulsory homework, the lack of a curriculum, the presence of supportive staff and the lack of enforced structure. In our study, the learners’ attributes that emerged as being relevant to self-directed learning are motivation, personal responsibility and resilience. Those external characteristics and learners’ attributes are discussed below.

Homework.

The lack of compulsory homework is a characteristic that is relished by a lot of the students we met. Noah (16), had been in mainstream education for all of primary school. He joined the Wicklow school when it opened. For him, the freedom from home-work really seems to bring him joy:

“I just love that there is no homework. For like my entire school life I had homework.... [A few months ago, I said to my Dad], “Hey Dad, you know what the best thing in the world is? The fact that I’m not going home to homework. Not going home to that every day is just such a good feeling.”

Olan (12), went to a mainstream primary school until 5th class, and joined Sligo school last September. He found homework stressful:

“And like when I was in normal school, you have to do homework, and sometimes I’d forget to do it. So then I’d have to do it the next night, so I was always stressed.”

Rachel (parent) relates her experience of her son’s relationship with homework:

“It was homework in subjects that he didn’t enjoy and didn’t understand, didn’t want to do but had to do... and he refused to do, or... he would do the bare minimum and with that comes detentions, comes negative feedback and he was slowly becoming small, and losing his own light...”

Curriculum.

The lack of a curriculum is fundamental to the students self-directing their own learning. Felix (16) refers to the constricted nature of mainstream curriculum, and how it curtailed his learning:

“So, for example, music was a big thing for me and in first year we had this amazing music room with like 2 drumkits and a gazillion guitars and it was amazing and I got to play a ton of music and then in 2nd year we only did music theory... it was just like music history and like taking down notes and we just sat there, day in and day out, just looking at the board, taking down notes and it was like I learned nothing from that.”

For Rachel (parent), the blind adherence to curriculum caused problems for her son:

“Frank loves Art. He loves drawing. And in school he chose art and that knocked his confidence, because... the art teacher there, who was just constantly telling him he was wrong, that his pictures were wrong... he would come home and his shoulders were heavy and he was sad and it was confirming to him “I’m terrible at this. I can’t do this; the art teacher is telling

me.” She never said he was terrible but she would set projects for them and Frank would go ahead and do the project and she would say “it’s wrong” ... and that crushed him.”

Louise (staff) believes that the lack of a curriculum in the Sudbury model enables the student to have the space to really self-direct their own learning. Figure 2 illustrates two children taking some time out to have a chat about something.

“But I think in mainstream school, when you get to like, your teens, it’s “put your head down and read what we tell you to read, write what we tell you to write, learn what we tell you to learn.” Whereas here, it’s “look at the world... and choose something that you want to learn. Take bits from everything and you know, be jack of all trades, rather than, you know, an expert in 6th year biology, that you might not use ever again...”



Figure 2. Two school children having a chat in Sligo school. February 15, 2019.

Supportive staff.

The presence of supportive staff provides the scaffolding that is sometimes required in a self-directed learning environment. Joanne (15) explains:

"....a while ago [I] wanted to have... staff members... to push me to write my essay, because I really wanted to write it but I was getting unmotivated. So you can do that, where you can ask them to ask you to do it, and then as soon as you go "Okay, I don't need you to push me anymore." They won't do it..."

Karla (16) describes how staff have helped her become self-motivated, which helps with self-directed learning:

"And staff members are amazing in the way that they support you, and they kind of push you in a way to get your own engine running, to do it yourself. So that's something that I hadn't experienced before like I came here."

Emerging Structure.

Brian (staff), talks about how staff sometimes help students with structures. Figure 3 illustrates how lots of optional structures are in place.

"It's maybe an understandable misconception of Sudbury that we're against structure. What we're against is enforced structure. So I would then see my role as creating lots of optional structures for people... I think everyone needs a certain amount of structure. Nobody likes kind of drifting from day to day. Ehm, you want a good balance there. Ehm, that everyone needs to kind of learn how to formulate their own structures here, and get help with that."

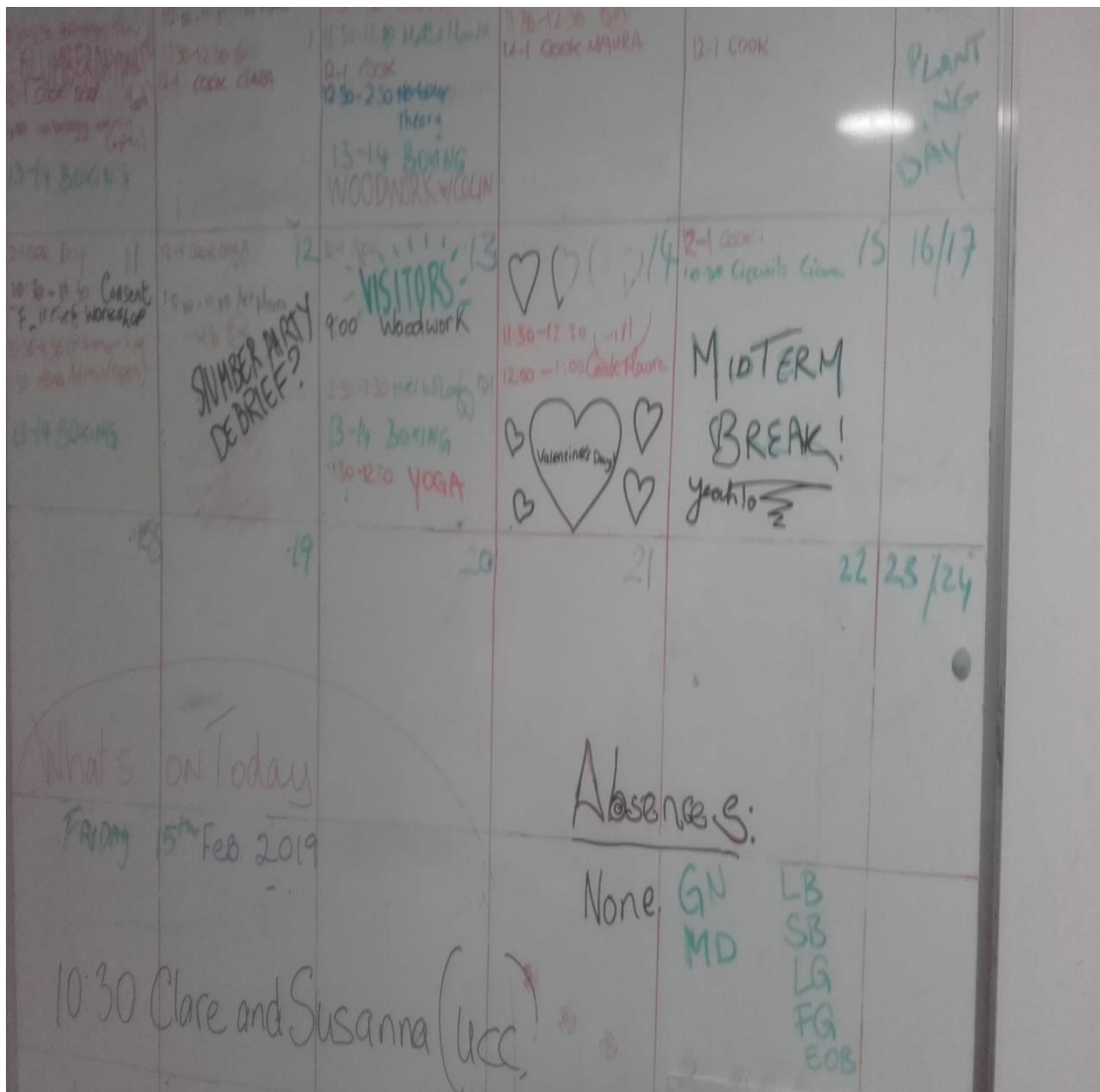


Figure 3. Notice board in Sligo school, showing a busy schedule. February 14, 2019.

The lack of enforced structure really resonates with Noah (16) as it provides the freedom he needs:

“...And also I just love here I have a choice of what I want to do because I get overwhelmed easily. So I could be sitting in a meeting. I could just think, I just can’t stop moving. I’m getting overwhelmed by all the information that’s going through my head because I’m dyspraxic, which means I don’t process information as easily as others. So here, I can just say no, I don’t want to do this, or I can just get up and leave. And it won’t be “sit back down”, you know.”

Louise (staff) comments on the fact that the self-directed learning often seems unstructured, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that in fact there is a hidden structure, not visible at first sight:

“Cos it can be so random the way things work and unless you’re really tuned in, then you’re sitting at the table and you realise wow they’re having a really in-depth conversation about politics and those 2 are playing chess, and someone’s playing guitar, she’s learning how to cook. Like there’s a lot of things going on at once but it doesn’t look like there is sometimes.”

Motivation.

Motivation came up quite a lot in our interviews. Frank (16) relates his experience in mainstream education which he believes led him to becoming very unmotivated and compares this with the high levels of motivation he is experiencing in Sudbury:

“... I shut down every opportunity I had to maybe go out and try to find some new hobbies or do anything that wasn’t just playing video games and I never did my home-work... And today now I’m the most motivated I’ve ever been to get stuff done, to exercise, to... Cos motivation is all you really need in my opinion to get work done, and to want to work and the feeling of wanting to work and wanting to have a future is bloody brilliant, because in mainstream I didn’t have that. I just had no aspirations whatsoever. I was just a blank slate and invisible.”

This description coincides with how Frank’s mother Rachel describes his transformation from mainstream school to Sudbury school:

“...now he is more out and about, more interested, more curious in what’s out there... Frank used to be a very big junk food eater and... But off his own back now he is working out every day... and his whole diet has changed ... He is engaged with people and the world around, looking for a job. He came to me last week and he said, “Mum I think I may want to do my leaving cert”. He is not sure but he is thinking about it, this is a kid that if you would have seen him in second year, third year you would have said “no way”.”

Fachtna (10), who had attended mainstream initially, equates self-directed learning to increased motivation:

“And you have freedom to just like have a nap for the entire day, but the motivation to do the things, like it's scientifically proven that you will be more motivated to learn things if you have the option not to.”

Personal Responsibility.

Personal responsibility can be defined as a person's perception that the achievement of a designated outcome is their responsibility (Weiner, 1979 as cited by Yulan et al, 2019). Joanne (15) discusses her own sense of personal responsibility in becoming a Sudbury student:

“[My Mom] was like “cool, yeah, let's set up a meeting with Caroline – you do it yourself”. So I did, and then you know, now I'm here. I feel like that as well showed like, self-directedness, self-motivation to set up the meeting myself, rather than...Yeah, rather than my Mom going and setting it up, I literally just showed up one day and asked Caroline if I could have a meeting with her later in the week.”

Rachel (parent) discusses Joanne being personally responsible for following her interests:

“She is very interested in politics... [and] organized for herself to go to UCD twice a week into a philosophy lecture and she did that. All on her own... And went into critical thinking lectures... and she loved that and she made her own way there from here...having that independence is helping her and helping her go towards, you know, philosophy and politics. She's very interested in those.”

Resilience.

Resilience is required to cope with the difficulties that can present with a self-directed learning environment. Joanne (15) talks about her experience:

“Some people are straight away, have always known their whole life that this is what they wanted to do. And are so good in a self-directed environment, but I think for me, and maybe other students, it was so much more difficult and it

still is, being in this place, because of the way it works... I went through quite a depressive period of... not doing anything in the school, and then not doing anything at home... and then like feeling really terrible because I wasn't doing anything... and I was just staying in bed or staying up here and not really engaging myself... I think it was just my brain hadn't realised that I could just do something that I wanted to do, and that it wasn't like someone would tell me to do it. That if I wanted to do something, I could just do it..."

Emotional and Psychological Effects of Partaking in Democratic Education

Most of the older (12+) students we met had participated in mainstream education in the past. The majority of them reported that the most difficult aspect of mainstream education had been the negative emotional and psychological effects they experienced there. A lot of them had been extremely unhappy, and felt much better - both emotionally and psychologically - in Sudbury, especially once they went through the deschooling process. One of the most striking things that I noticed was the level of maturity of the teenage students in particular. It was difficult to determine initially who was staff and who was a student. Physically, the students seemed very mature – looking more like people in their early 20s rather than teenagers. A lot of the students seemed to express themselves freely in their dress code, wearing unconventional clothes, and sporting unconventional hairstyles, as demonstrated in Figure 4, where a young boy is dressed the way he wants to dress. It was refreshing to see such individuality and diversity expressed in this way.

As we got to know the teenage students a bit more, it also struck me how emotionally and socially mature a lot of them seemed to be. They seemed to be wise beyond their years, having a real insight into themselves and their environment. This may well be attributable to their self-directed learning, which has caused them to reflect a lot on their own lives, and the surroundings in which they find themselves. In both schools, the parents we spoke to had noted a change in their children's level of maturity. For Mairead (parent of 2 boys – 12 and 8), it was the increase in her children's level of social maturity that she noticed most:

"I think they've matured hugely in the few months that we've been here. I would have been happy with their development already, emotionally and

intellectually... I think they've really matured socially. That's the biggest change that I've seen."



Figure 4. Boy expressing his own sense of style in Wicklow school. January 17, 2019.

Jane noticed a change in her children's level of maturity as well, particularly in how they relate to adults:

"Audrey has matured a lot, now that may have happened anyway, but we've really noticed that she's maturing a lot, and is even more independent than she was. She's comfortable in her own skin, and more comfortable relating to adults, especially adults she doesn't know. And likewise for Chloe. She was always comfortable relating to adults, but I had noticed in the last few years that that had closed down, like with unfamiliar adults. She began to relate to them a little more shyly. That's just opened up again. It's lovely to see, because that's probably an indicator in the shift in the power dynamic."

We had the opportunity to observe a Judicial Committee take place. Three of the children, aged about 10, had been “written up” for an incident the previous day. As the proceedings were taking place, the boys in question were rolling around on the floor, messing and giggling. One of the staff members, and older students, were encouraging them to be quieter, but they just seemed to be restless, and keen to get outdoors and run around. This continued until it was time for the self-reflection part of the Judicial Committee to take place, where one of the “written up” boys was helped reflect on what he had done the day before, and why he was here now. I really noticed how this particular boy changed in front of my eyes, from being a giggling, giddy 10 year old to being still and quiet and really slow down in order to reflect. A stillness came over him, which I thought was amazing. He portrayed a level of maturity, way beyond his chronological age, to be able to do this.

Social skills and friendships.

Friendships, in both schools, were of great import. The children seemed very comfortable with each other, as can be seen in Figure 5, where a group of students enjoy relaxing in one of their favourite rooms. Obviously they do have disagreements at times (although we did not witness any), but apparently these are resolved much more readily now, as the children have learned to adapt to the freer environment of Sudbury.

Caoimhe (staff) talks of her experience of observing the younger children at her school:

“They’ve really come [on] in the emotional intelligence side of things. How they... react to others, or be respectful to others. The mixing is really good, and how to deal with different situations. At the start, there were a lot of flare-ups, but they’re dealing with those situations much better.”



Figure 5. Students in Sligo school enjoying each other's company. February 15, 2019.

Mairead discusses how her son (8) has developed emotionally since joining the school:

"[his] awareness of other people's experience and just... group dynamics and compromise and all that kind of learning has been huge. It's a very personal thing to each child, and that's what he needed to learn, and that's what he has gained instantly from this environment. So, it provides him now with a really stable platform to eh, develop his own interests. You know, he had a lot of emotional learning to do, when he came in."

Rachel describes her son's transition from previous friendships to new-found friendships at Sudbury:

"[Frank] wouldn't go out, he wouldn't have friends over, ...just... video games and his online relationships with his friends. And I [was] very worried because ... there was no ..wants to go out, wants to meet up with the gang. He has such a love for the people here... his online friends well... have dropped away because to him, being here and being around people that cared and

considered what he talked about and, you know, considerate people, he could see that the other group were being so mean to him... when he made that break away from that group, that completely solidified him here really, and now he is more out and about, more interested, more curious in what's out there. If I'd kept him in the school where he was, we would not be in a good place"

Frank's own narrative was quite consistent with that of his mother. My impression of Frank (16) as he spoke about his friendships, old and new, was that he was very relieved and grateful to have found Sudbury:

"My friends at the time, they were just awful people. We all just screamed through our microphones with each other just playing games and it was just ah, it was the worst. I had no close friends in school. Coming to Sudbury was a total eye-opener. It was like a dream come true because eh, coming in my first day, I was greeted, I was welcomed... everyone was so like glowing with happiness and everyone was just doing what they want to do. And since, since that day I was able to realise that the friendships that I had with these guys online, it was awful. I discontinued my friendships with them and it was so bloody awesome. I felt so good about it cos getting to know everyone here was like "this is what friendship is, this is, this is what it should feel like". I should be able to talk to my friends and feel like they actually care about what I have to say. Being able to come in and feel totally comfortable with everyone, it's great."

Joanne (Frank's sister) really noticed a difference in her brother:

"Then when you went to Sudbury... like every day, as soon as you came home, you were like glowing and so happy, and we started actually building a friendship with each other. And it was just like... being around people with the same mindset as you has made you almost like come out of your shell, and like see the world in such a bright light."

Senan (12) had spent his first 2 years of schooling in mainstream education, but then had been home-schooled, with his younger brother, until last year, when he joined the Sudbury school. He enjoys the social aspect of being a part of the school:

“In home-school, you get to choose what you do, but you don’t have any friends there, there’s no-one there. Here, both of the two good things are combined. You get to do what you like here, but you have friends.”

Senan’s father Flavio echoes this:

“The only thing that was lacking in home-schooling was greater opportunities for social input from peers .. that kind of spontaneous relationship and friendship building.”

For Jack (13), his previous school had not worked out for him socially:

“I didn’t get on with a lot of people. I had a few fights, a few different things that... the school wasn’t for me.”

Len (16) informed us that he is on the autism spectrum. He describes the social positives and negatives for him at Sudbury:

“[Mainstream school] wasn’t great, it just wasn’t. Even break time I usually hung out by myself sort of aimlessly running around the yard. I came here for my friends. Strangely it feels quite empty at times [here] ... Sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way. Good way because I can relax, bad way because it gets lonely.”

Despite most of the students being very happy socially in Sudbury, for some students this was mixed with a real sense of loss around leaving their old friends behind, when they decided to come to Sudbury. It had been a factor which had caused them some indecision around joining the school in the first place. Noah (16) had rejected the idea of going to Sudbury initially:

“cos I wanted to go to mainstream with all my friends.”

Even though Elijah (15) had been very unhappy in mainstream, there was still a pull to stay there, because of his friends:

“you know I had friends... that I had... spent 8 years of my life with ehm, in primary school and it was difficult to sort of say goodbye in that way and go to, make the decision to go to this school.”

Audrey (5) missed her playschool friends:

“I didn’t want to leave my friends, but I liked the school, but I miss... all of my friends...”

Even though Chloe (7) was happy to come to Sudbury, there were mixed emotions too:

“but sad too because... I had to leave my friends behind.”

Jane (Chloe’s Mom), acknowledges this:

“...she struggled a lot with just missing her friends, especially.”

For me, these mixed emotions reflect the complicated nature of students’ experiences of previous education. For some of those students who had a negative experience there, the friendship aspect had been quite positive, and there was a sense of loss around leaving that go. My overall impression though, was that, despite this, the students really appreciated and valued the quality and depth of their new friendships, which can be seen in the descriptions given by Frank, Senan and Len above.

Self-confidence.

It was felt by the staff in both schools, that the students’ level of confidence had increased dramatically in the Sudbury environment. Brian (staff) comments on how he can see the changes happening:

“The transformation from people who were riddled with anxiety and self-esteem issues eh to being able to talk about those things. Not that they’re completely gone, but they have the ability to ask for help, to talk about them. But also that they have diminished an awful lot and the emergence of people’s characters, you know, people who could barely talk to somebody when they met them to presenting, you know chairing workshops in Hamburg whatever. I’ve seen big improvements there.”

Figure 6 shows a student confidently writing up the agenda for the upcoming school meeting.

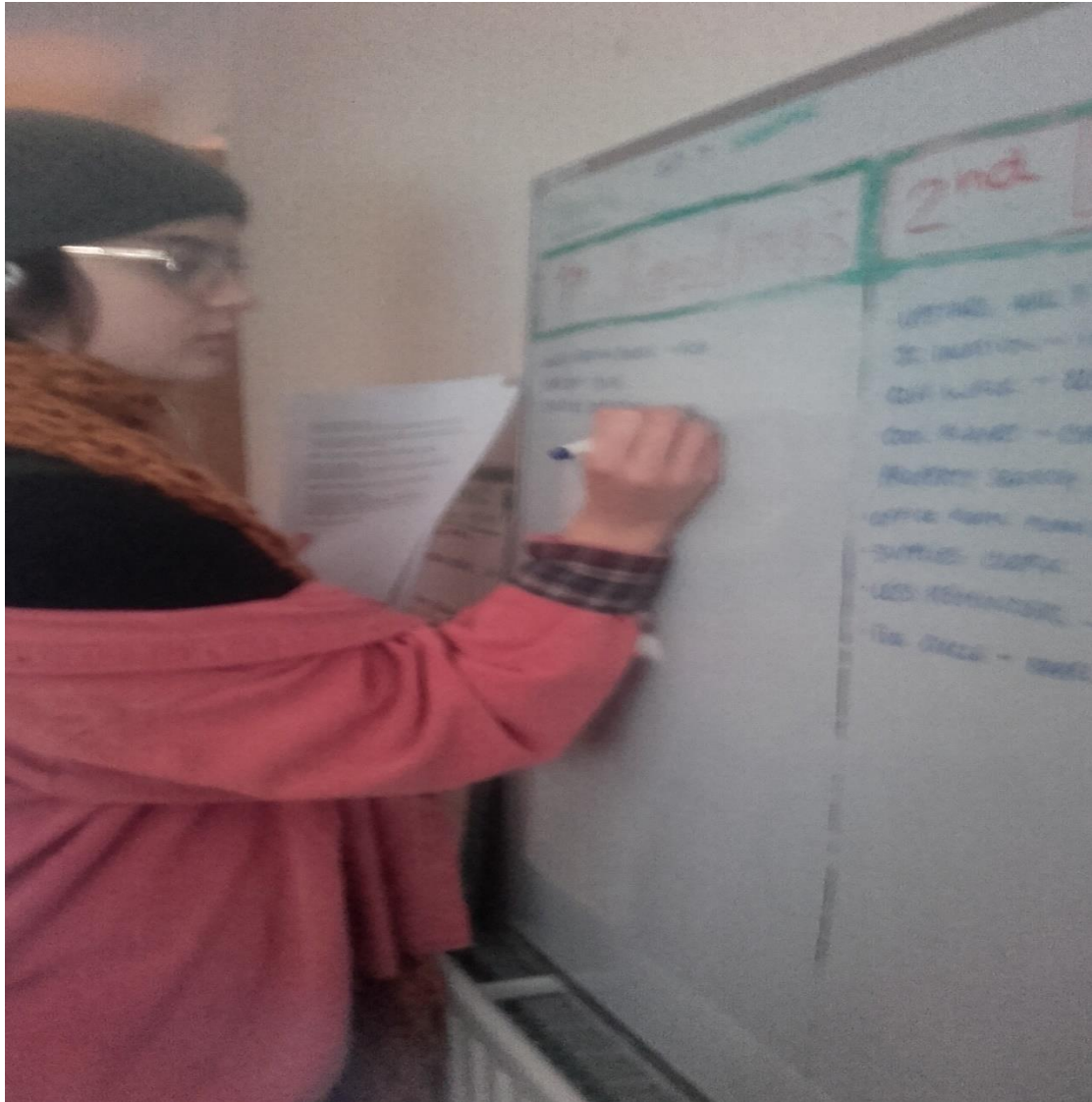


Figure 6. Student preparing for the School Meeting in Wicklow. January 17, 2019.

Rob (staff) attributes the high levels of confidence to the fact that everyone, regardless of age, is listened to:

“Like if someone wants to speak and you’re eight... the eight year old would just put up their hand and would speak and expect to be heard and that has got to be really good for your mental health.”

For Ellen (parent of girl - 10) her daughter’s confidence had increased significantly since she left mainstream and joined Sudbury:

“she is much more outspoken and confident. More sure in herself, whereas before she was happy in the summer away from school but within the first few weeks of returning to school she became a shadow of herself.”

The teenage students that we met, really seemed to notice the change in their own level of self-confidence. Elijah (15) attributes it to the trust he's been given as a Sudbury student, and also to the fact that he is listened to:

"I can definitely see a... change in myself... this school has kind of created... a safe space for me where I can build that confidence outside of the big wide world... I just feel like my level of confidence has gone up so much since joining the school. A big part of it is that I've been given, I've been trusted enough to make so many decisions around not just my education but my life in general... I then am able to trust myself as well to make... the right decisions and know that they're the right decisions... I find my interactions with other people in and out of school is just like ultimately so much better because I find it a lot easier [now] to just talk to people, and yeah not be afraid of what another person, or an adult is going to think of what I have to say because I always have this environment to come back to and to just be heard I think, yeah to be heard is a big part of it."

Communication skills.

Staff and parents perceived the students to have very effective communication skills. This may have contributed to my sense that the teenage students were so mature. In our Focus Groups, the children listened to each other and they gave each other space to speak. When they wanted to speak, they raised their hands. The older students encouraged the younger students when they got stuck in trying to say something. I could really see the benefits of mixed-age association in those situations. Mixed age association is very common between staff and students as well, as demonstrated in Figure 7.

For Flavio (parent of 2 boys – 12 and 8), the lessons his children have learned, especially in terms of how to communicate, have been invaluable:

"They have all the advantages of freedom to express themselves, to be heard, to engage in discourse and reasoning with their peers and with adults, and are learning about the responsibility that goes with this. I think they are getting very valuable life skills of negotiation..."



Figure 7. Students and staff chilling out in Sligo school. February 14, 2019.

The staff too were very aware of improved communication skills amongst the students. Brian (staff) attributes this to the space and time the students are given, as well as to the trust and respect the students are shown:

“it’s a model of how people can be with each other and how people can interact with each other eh in a much more empathetic way... a much more co-operative way... we’re actively cultivating people’s self-respect and their desire to speak up for themselves, in a respectful way, and to listen to others... the opportunity to sit down and work through those things and gain valuable communication skills... that can have a huge ripple effect on people’s lives.”

Discussion

Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

As stated earlier, the following questions were asked, to gain a sense of the overall experiences of those participating in a Sudbury Model School in Ireland:

For Students

1. Why are you attending a democratic school?

Most of the students fell into one of the following categories, which are not mutually exclusive:

- those whose parents believed in the concept of a democratically run school where their children would be in charge of their own learning.
- those who had been in other education systems, but were not happy in those systems. Rather than putting their mental health at risk or dropping out of education, they, or their parents, decided to try democratic education, to see if it better suited their requirements.

From my observations, the bulk of the students fell into the second category. They had tried mainstream school, had not been happy there, had subsequently tried the Sudbury model, and seemed to be thriving in the much looser framework. In their 1986 study, Gray and Chanoff found that some of the students enrolling at democratic schools had previously experienced serious school problems. The parental decision to enrol their child in a democratic school appeared to be a combination of a belief in the educational philosophy of the school and a previous school problem experienced elsewhere. Gray and Chanoff speculate that perhaps issues with conventional schooling were due to the children being dispositionally resistant to authority, and oriented more towards self-control. Such dispositions may be innate or may result from home environments that are non-authoritarian. As mentioned earlier, I had the impression that a lot of the family backgrounds were alternative – this may infer that they are non-authoritarian as well.

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of attending this type of school?

The main advantages mentioned to us were freedom - to play, to learn, to eat, to sleep; being trusted to self-direct their own learning; the quality of relationships with other students and with staff. The advantages of freedom and self-directed learning are echoed by Huang (2014), when she states that students in democratic schools are free in an educational sense. For Greenberg (1995) as cited by Huang (2014), there is no distinction in democratic schools between learning and fun, or work and play. It was difficult to get any of the students to identify disadvantages, as they seemed to be very happy in the schools, and felt they could change anything that they did not like through the school systems of School Meetings and Judicial Committees. Those disadvantages that were noted however, were the physical school itself (for Wicklow students – too small – see Figure 8), the lack of more peers (Sligo students) and the deschooling process as described earlier. In my research for this study, I did not come across the concept of deschooling, and the huge impact it can have on students at a Sudbury school. My study, as far as I know, is the first study to look in detail at this concept. Perhaps knowing that such a process may occur, would equip potential students with better skills to cope with it.

For Staff

1. How have you found the whole experience of working in a Sudbury School?

In general the staff seemed to find working in the schools very rewarding. Some of the staff seemed to have come across the Sudbury model by chance. For those members of staff, the whole experience seemed to be a huge learning curve, but one which they seemed to be enjoying. Other staff seemed to have sought out the opportunity to work in a Sudbury. Those staff seemed very interested in the philosophy underpinning the Sudbury model and really seemed to engage with it. (Gray & Chanoff, 1986) found that staff members of the Sudbury community tended to have varied backgrounds, each one serving as a potential role model and guide for the developing child. This was certainly my experience of the staff I met.



Figure 8. Making the most of small spaces in Wicklow school. January 16, 2019.

2. How does the system cater for students with special needs?

From a physical special needs perspective, staff at the Wicklow school felt very restricted in terms of what supports they could offer – due to the physical structure of the house, and the fact that it was a short-term rental property. The Sligo school had been thoroughly renovated recently and was fully compliant with disabled access regulations. For emotional or learning special needs, I felt neither school was fully confident in dealing with special needs in general, because the staff had not been trained. Staff felt they catered well with the students with special needs who were at the school (conditions such as dyspraxia, autism, pathological demand avoidance), but there was an acknowledgement that training would be needed. I could not find any research on this particular aspect of democratic education, and feel that this area is ripe for further study.

For Parents

1. What were the factors underlying the decision to send your child to a Sudbury school?

These factors were varied and very individual, but could be broadly divided into two main categories as were mentioned in relation to the first question for students.

2. Are there any concerns about your child's future because they follow such an unusual educational path?

For most parents we heard from, concern about their child's future raised its head occasionally. As mentioned earlier, graduates from Sudbury schools have done quite well, both in the world of work, and academically. Gray & Chanoff (1986) found that not only are a lot of the graduates employed in jobs which really interested them, but also self-directed learning and self-regulation inherent in the Sudbury model, helps them excel in college, where close monitoring by staff does not take place.

For All

1. What are the likely mental health effects of receiving a democratic education?

A lot of participants believed there were a lot of mental health benefits associated with being a student in the school, including reduced anxiety, increased self-

confidence, improved ability to communicate and improved levels of well-being. Children in democratic education learn to be tolerant, considerate and self-confident when given space to be themselves (“Summerhill – an Overview”, n.d.). Self-directed learning allows the students to become empowered at an early age, having “real world” practice which helps them to develop into adults who are experts at handling responsibility (Sudbury Valley School, 2009 as cited by Huang, 2014). Also, the attention given by all present at the school meetings to even the smallest child speaking, must be amazing for the child, and a real boost to their self-confidence (Piper, 2009). The ease with which students of all ages interact with adults, is seen as an excellent way of practicing leadership (Mercogliano, 1998, as cited by Huang, 2014).

Practical Implications

I was very positively orientated towards the ethos behind the Sudbury model of democratic education before starting the study, and my position has not changed since. I see it as a viable educational alternative, that allows for the emergence of intelligent, knowledgeable adults at the end of the school cycle, who not only have full access to third level education if they wish, but also have high levels of happiness, self-confidence and self-esteem. The over-emphasis, in mainstream education, on achieving high grades in academic subjects, within the confines of prescribed curricula, does not suit students who are not academically inclined, or do not enjoy learning, or feel unable to learn, in such a confined, prescriptive way. There is quite a lot of rigidity associated with mainstream education. For a lot of students, mainstream education is a means which is justified by the end. It facilitates their socialisation, teaches the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, and enables the acquisition of academic qualifications required to progress to third level education. It may sometimes be challenging, but not unduly so, and is tolerated, sometimes enjoyed, as an accepted social construct. For others though, it proves to be a stifling atmosphere in which they must spend their childhood and teenage years. It can cause a lot of anxiety for some students (and their families). The Sudbury model of democratic education sees itself as an alternative education system suitable to all students who wish to engage in it (Gray & Chanoff, 1986). The codicil to this is that, in Ireland in any case, the students need to afford the school fees, as the alternative (non-recognised) schools do not receive any state funding, and at the time of writing, no

school bursaries were available to students in either of the two schools we visited, due to the financial constraints of both schools. The fee-paying nature of the schools in Ireland seems to be something staff in both schools were uncomfortable with, but could see no other alternative to, for the moment. As I think it may be unlikely that the Sudbury model will become widespread in Ireland in the near future, it may be worthwhile to look at the possibility of amalgamating some of its characteristics into mainstream education. The state could also help fund these schools by providing educational grants which could follow students regardless of what education system they access – mainstream or alternative. That way, all children could benefit from the huge advantages that the Sudbury model provides, without confining it to an elite minority.

Limitations

As our study was focused on Sudbury schools in Ireland, and there are only two such schools, with small student numbers, our number of participants was quite small. It may be difficult to generalise the results found from studying these two schools alone, but this will be helped in future studies by including new Sudbury schools as and when they are founded in Ireland.

In terms of student participation, it was generally (but not exclusively) the older students who really got involved in our study. Future research would benefit from finding ways to include younger participants more. This would give a more rounded view of the student experience.

Suggestions for Future Research

While analysing the data in our study, a lot of really interesting themes emerged for me, but due to external constraints, such as time pressures and the word-count limitation of my Final Year Project Report, I concentrated on those themes which resonated most with me in terms of the richness of data, my own personal interest, and the applicability of the theme to my research question. However, there is a lot of other information which was gathered, but not used, as it was not pertinent to the focus of this particular study. Such data is useful in terms of guiding future research – is self-regulation an issue (a big fear for parents is that their children will

just play video games all day); how well does the model cater for students with special needs; what does the future hold for graduates of the Sudbury model in Ireland, and do individual differences play an important role in determining whether a student thrives in Sudbury schooling? Is the model more suited to people who find it hard to function in authoritarian structures, where they are being constantly told what to do; or who are quite self-reflective – think a lot, and engage in a lot of introspection; or are prone to experiencing high levels of anxiety? Whatever the focus of future studies is, it is certain that research in this area has plenty of room in which to grow.

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Appendix I

Staff Questions:

- What are your reasons for being here? How did it come about?
- What training, if any, did you receive in this type of schooling?
- Is working here what you expected it to be like?
- How does working here affect your personal life?
- What do you imagine are the effects, if any, of this type of schooling on a student's mental health?
- How does this schooling cater for special needs?
- Do you feel there's a lot of diversity here, or do the students tend to come from similar socio-economic-cultural backgrounds, with similar life philosophies?
- Do you feel democracy is always right? What happens to the minority?
- How is the whole area of child safety managed?

Parents' Questions:

- Can you tell us about the decision to send your child here? Hopes, fears, dilemmas?
- How is the experience of democratic education working out for you?
- How does your child's participation in democratic education affect your family/home life?

Focus Group Questions (Wicklow):

- How did you end up coming to this school?
- What are the good/not-so-good things about being here?
- Do you feel your school caters for differences or special needs?
- Do you feel your voice is heard here?
- Do you feel that your fellow students come from similar backgrounds with similar views?
- Do you feel that this type of schooling would suit everyone?
- What's it like when the vote goes against your wishes?
- Do you find that sometimes you have to defend the type of education you receive?
- For those of you who have been to mainstream school, what are the differences here – good and bad?
- How do you learn here?
- Did it take you a while to settle in?
- Are your families run like the school – freedom/votes?
- Have you a plan for when you finish school?
- Have you any questions for us?

Focus Group Questions (Sligo):

- Why are you coming to this school instead of a mainstream school?
- What is coming to this school like for you?
- What are the things you like/don't like about it?
- Can you remember anything happening here that you didn't like, such as a JC or an argument? What happened? Was that ok with you?
- Do you get to do things here, that you like doing?
- If you were in a different school/homeschooling before, what's different about here?
- Is there anything you like here that you didn't have before?
- Do you miss anything from before?
- How do you learn things at this school? How does that work?
- Is your family life like here? Do you have meetings and a vote at home too?
- What are your plans for when you leave school?

Appendix II

Dear Wicklow Sudbury School

Our names are Susana Espana Lara and Clare O'Brien, and we are final year students of Applied Psychology at UCC. For our Final Year Project, we are very interested in exploring the world of Democratic Education. As we are aware that your school is one of only two democratic schools in Ireland, we, together with our Supervisor Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski, would be very interested in meeting with you and the rest of the school community. We would like to discuss the possibility of taking part in the life of your school for a few days (possibly one week). We would love to be given such a chance to absorb the essence of what a democratic school is: to observe what goes on, and talk to children, parents, teachers and any other stakeholders involved in your school. The results of that experience would then be written up in our final year project report.

At present our main questions concerning democratic education are as follows:

1. What is the experience like for the children? How do they feel at their school, do they think that their voice is heard, what are their interests?
2. For children who previously attended mainstream education, how does the experience of the two types of school compare?
3. What are the motivations, beliefs and experiences of adults working in the school?
4. How did parents decide to choose your school for their children? What are their experiences of your school?

These are preliminary questions only; they are likely to evolve as the project progresses — especially if we get a chance to meet you and experience the school first hand. We very much look forward to hearing from you, and hope to meet you in the near future.

Kind regards

Susana Espana Lara

116765441@umail.ucc.ie

Clare O'Brien

84028653@umail.ucc.ie

Dear Sligo Sudbury School

Our names are Susana Espana Lara and Clare O'Brien, and we are final year students of Applied Psychology at UCC. For our Final Year Project, we are very interested in exploring the world of Democratic Education. As we are aware that your school is one of only two democratic schools in Ireland, we, together with our Supervisor Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski, would be very interested in meeting with you and the rest of the school community. We would like to discuss the possibility of taking part in the life of your school for a few days (possibly one week). We would love to be given such a chance to absorb the essence of what a democratic school is: to observe what goes on, and talk to children, parents, teachers and any other stakeholders involved in your school. The results of that experience would then be written up in our final year project report.

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Kind regards

Susana Espana Lara

116765441@umail.ucc.ie

Clare O'Brien

84028653@umail.ucc.ie

Appendix III

INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS



Purpose of the Study. As part of the requirements for our Psychology Degree/Higher Diploma at UCC, we have to carry out a research study. For our study, we have chosen to look at democratic education, and the experiences of children, parents and staff in a democratic school.

What will the study involve? The study will involve us going to visit your child's school for a short period of time (3 or 4 days). During that time, we would like to observe how the school works, see what happens during a regular day, and take part in any way that we can. We would also like to hold focus groups (informal group chats with 4-5 children), where the children have an opportunity to talk, and share their experiences of school-life. The children may be given some questionnaires to complete, once the focus groups have finished. We would also like to talk to you – the parents – and to the school staff. Our observations and conversations would focus on the following broad questions:

1. What is the experience like for the children? How do they feel at their school, do they think that their voice is heard, and their needs and interests secured?
2. For children who previously attended mainstream education, how does the experience of the two types of school compare?
3. What are the motivations, beliefs and experiences of adults working in the school?
4. How did you — the parents — decide to choose this school for their children? What were your hopes, fears and dilemmas around that decision?
5. How do you see that decision now? Is the democratic school your child attends

just like you expected it to be, or rather different?

6. How does your child's participation in democratic education affect your home and family life?

In terms of our conversation with you – the parents – these could take place in person, over the phone, via email, or through an online survey.

Why me and my child? We are inviting you and your child to take part because your child is attending one of the two democratic schools that exist in Ireland.

Does your child have to take part? No. Participation is voluntary. Your child has been given an information sheet, explaining the nature of our study. If your child would like to take part in the study, then you will be asked to sign the consent form attached, providing consent for your child to take part in this study. Your child has the right to withdraw their information before and during the visit, and for up to 4 weeks after the visit (up to 17.02.19).

Will your child's participation in the study be kept confidential? Whilst we will be naming the school, your child's name will not be used in the study. We will ensure that no clues to the identity of your child will appear in our thesis. Any direct quotes that will appear in our thesis will be entirely anonymous and names will be modified.

What will happen to the information which your child gives? The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to the two of us and our research supervisor, Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski. It will be securely stored and on completion of the project, will be retained for a further ten years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by our supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal.

Who has reviewed this study? The Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC has reviewed and approved this study.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact us:

Susana Espana Lara: 116765441@uemail.ucc.ie

Clare O'Brien: 84028653@uemail.ucc.ie

Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski (Supervisor): m.szczerbinski@ucc.ie

If you agree for your child to take part in the study, please sign the consent form attached.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Susana Espana Lara

Clare O'Brien

CONSENT FORM



I.....agree for my child
and/or myself to participate in the research study of Susana Espana Lara and Clare
O'Brien.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.	YES	NO
I understand that my child will be informed about the study and will decide whether —and to what extent —they wish to participate	YES	NO
I understand that my child can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while they are participating.	YES	NO
I give permission for my child's interview with Susana and/or Clare to be audio- recorded.	YES	NO
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.	YES	NO
I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my child's identity.	YES	NO
I understand that disguised extracts from my child's interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications and give my consent for that.	YES	NO

Signed:

Date:

PRINT NAME:

CHILD'S NAME:

INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM**FOR STAFF**

Purpose of the Study. As part of the requirements for our Psychology Degree/Higher Diploma at UCC, we have to carry out a research study. For our study, we have chosen to look at democratic education, and the experiences of children, parents and staff in a democratic school.

What will the study involve? The study will involve us going to visit your school for a short period of time (3 or 4 days). During that time, we would like to observe how the school works, see what happens during a regular day, and take part in any way that we can. We would also like to hold focus groups (informal group chats with 4-5 children), where the children have an opportunity to talk, and share their experiences of school-life. We would also like to talk to you – the school staff – and to the parents. Our observations and conversations would focus on the following broad questions:

1. What is the experience like for the children? How do they feel at their school, do they think that their voice is heard, and their needs and interests secured?
2. For children who previously attended mainstream education, how does the experience of the two types of school compare?
3. How did the parents decide to choose this school for their children? What were their hopes, fears and dilemmas around that decision?
4. What are your motivations, beliefs and experiences as staff working in the school?
5. Is working in a democratic school just like you expected it to be, or rather different?

6. How does your participation in democratic education affect your home and family life?

Why me? We are inviting you to take part because you are working in one of the two democratic schools that exist in Ireland.

Do you have to take part? No. Participation is voluntary. This information sheet explains the nature of our study. If you would like to take part in the study, then you will be asked to sign the consent form attached, providing consent for you to take part in this study. You have the right to withdraw your information before and during the visit, and for up to 4 weeks after the visit (up to 17.02.19).

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Whilst we will be naming the school, your name will not be used in the study. We will ensure that no clues to your identity will appear in our thesis. Any direct quotes that will appear in our thesis will be entirely anonymous and names will be modified.

What will happen to the information which you give? The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to the two of us and our research supervisor, Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski. It will be securely stored and on completion of the project, will be retained for a further ten years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by our supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal.

Who has reviewed this study? The Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC has reviewed and approved this study.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact us:

Susana Espana Lara: 116765441@uamail.ucc.ie

Clare O'Brien: 84028653@uamail.ucc.ie

Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski (Supervisor): m.szczerbinski@ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form attached.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Susana Espana Lara

Clare O'Brien

CONSENT FORM



I.....agree to participate in the research study
of Susana Espana Lara and Clare O'Brien.




The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.	YES	NO
I have been informed about the study.	YES	NO
I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.	YES	NO
I give permission for my interview with Susana and/or Clare to be audio-recorded.	YES	NO
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.	YES	NO
I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.	YES	NO
I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications and give my consent for that.	YES	NO

Signed:

Date:

PRINT NAME:

Information Sheet for students of Wicklow Sudbury School**19.10.18****1. Who are we?**

<p>Susana Espana Lara: I am a final year psychology student. I am from the South of Spain, Seville and I live in Cork for the last 12 years.</p>	
<p>Clare O'Brien: I'm studying Psychology at UCC, and I'm in my final year. I am from Cork, I have a 16 year old son, and a 6 year old dog, called Rosie.</p>	
<p>Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski: I am a lecturer of Psychology at UCC. I am Susana and Clare's supervisor for this project. I am Polish, but love living in Cork!</p>	

2. What are we doing?

We are doing our final year psychology project on democratic education and need you guys to help us.

3. What do we want from you?

We would love to be able to spend 3-4 days in your school with you and talk about your experiences in the school. We would like to ask you some questions too, like:

- If you were at another type of school before, what are the differences between the 2 schools?
- How come you are going to this school?
- How do you learn things at this school – how does the system work?
- Is your home life like your school life – do you have family meetings and a vote there too?
- What are your hopes and plans for when you finish school?

4.What will we do with the information?

We will be writing a project about our visit and observations here in the school. We will include everything you tell us about the school, but it will be anonymous (no-one will know who said what - we won't be using your real names). If there is something you don't want us to write, let us know and we won't include it in the report.

5.What if you change your mind afterwards, and don't want to be a part of the study?

If you agree to take part in this study, but change your mind later, that's no problem – we'll exclude anything that you said (once you tell us before we write our project). If you want to be a part of this study, but don't want us to use something in particular that you said, that's fine, we won't include that.

6.What if you want to find out more?

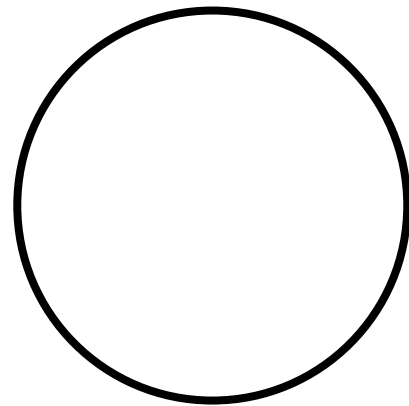
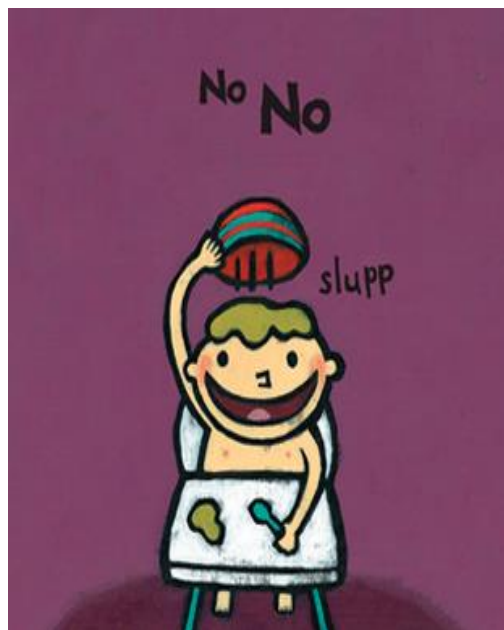
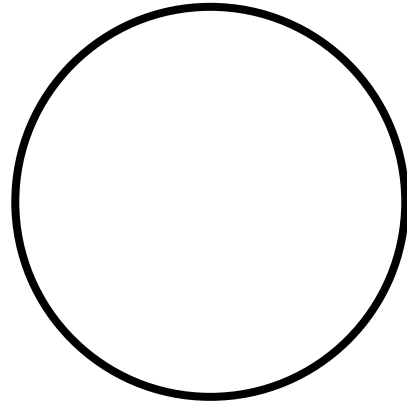
If you have any queries about the project, you can email us anytime:

Susana: 116765441@umail.ucc.ie

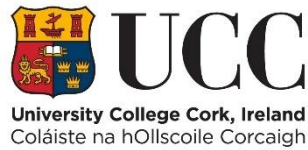
Marcin: m.szczerbinski@ucc.ie

Clare: 84028653@umail.ucc.ie

7. Now that you know what the project is going to be about, are you happy to take part in it?



Appendix IV

**ETHICS APPLICATION FORM**

School of Applied Psychology UCC

(adapted from UCC Social Research Ethics Committee documentation)

Introduction

UCC academic staff and postgraduate research students who are seeking ethical approval should use this application form.

Application Checklist

This checklist includes all of the items that are required for an application to be deemed complete. In the event that any of these are not present, the application will be returned to the applicant without having been sent to review. Please ensure that your application includes all of these prior to submission. Thank you.

Completed Application Checklist	x
Completed Ethical Approval Self-Evaluation	x
Completed Description of Project	x
Information Sheet(s)	x
Consent Sheet(s)	x
Psychometric Instruments / Interview / Focus Group Schedules	x
I have consulted the UCC <i>Code of Research Conduct</i> and believe my proposal is in line with its requirements	x
If you are under academic supervision, your supervisor has approved the wording of and co-signed this application prior to submission	x

APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of applicant(s)	Susana Espana Lara 116765441	Date	18.12.18
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	Clare O'Brien 84028653		
Department/School/Unit, & Supervisor's Name	UCC, School of Applied Psychology, Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski	Phone	087 2393836 087 2872926
Correspondence Address	c/o Dr. Marcin Szczerbinski, School of Applied Psychology, UCC	Email	116765441@umail.ucc.ie 84028653@umail.ucc.ie
Title of Project	Alternatives to coercive education: democratic schools		

ETHICAL APPROVAL SELF-EVALUATION

		YES	NO
1	Do you consider that this project has significant ethical implications?		x
2	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	x	
3	Will participation be voluntary?	x	
4	Will you obtain informed consent in writing from participants?	x	
5	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason, and (where relevant) omit questionnaire items to which they do not wish to respond?	x	
6	Will data be treated with full confidentiality / anonymity (as appropriate)?	x	

7	Will data be securely held for a minimum period of ten years after the completion of a research project, in line with the University's Code of Research Conduct?	x	
8	If results are published, will anonymity be maintained and participants not identified?	x	
9	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?	x	
10	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way?		x
11	Will your participants include children (under 18 years of age)?	x	
12	Will your participants include people with learning or communication difficulties?	x	
13	Will your participants include patients?		x
14	Will your participants include people in custody?		x
15	Will your participants include people engaged in illegal activities (e.g. drug taking; illegal Internet behaviour)?		x
16	Is there a realistic risk of participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress?		x

17	If yes to 16, has a proposed procedure, including the name of a contact person, been given? (see no 25)		
18	If yes to 11, is your research informed by the UCC Child Protection Policy? http://www.ucc.ie/en/ocla/policy/	x	

Please note this is a resubmission, with the following clarifications:

☐ The reviewers note that the school has been visited ***PRIOR*** to obtaining ethical permission, so this becomes a retrospective application.

Please note the ethical considerations;

Please note that the visit was purely an exploratory one. It was explained at our meeting with the school that the study was dependent on ethics approval being received, so we respectfully maintain this is still a prospective application rather than a retrospective application.

☐ The form does not state whether Garda clearance has been obtained for the AP FYP students doing the ethnographic research. Permission is dependent on this clearance being in place.

We have both been vetted previously, and are currently in the process of obtaining Garda clearance through UCC. Data collection will not begin until such clearance has been obtained.

☐ Question to students re home life versus school life in the information and consent sheet, what is the protocol if something comes up? (Limits to confidentiality/possibility of abuse or harm).

This question is not designed to probe into conflicts or difficulties at home. Rather it is aimed at looking at parenting styles and the impact attending a democratic school may have on home-life. Consequently, we consider it unlikely that any significant issues will be reported. The target population consists of typical, well-functioning families as far as we know, which reduces the likelihood further. In the unlikely event of serious concerns about home/school life arising, these will be discussed with our supervisor and the letter of the law will be followed. If an issue concerning some form

of child abuse is raised, this will be reported to the school authorities, following discussion with our supervisor.

☐ You mention you are not planning on doing a formal debriefing, but what form of debriefing are you doing?

A formal debriefing letter at the end seems inappropriate in this type of fluid, ethnographic study. Instead, we propose the following:

- 1) We are going to be available throughout the study to answer any questions or deal with any issues that may arise during our 3-day visit.
- 2) We are going to have a closing meeting thanking participants and answering any outstanding questions.
- 3) Once our report is finalised, we will issue a lay-person summary of our findings which will be given to the school.

☐ Tick boxes on cover sheet, please.

Done.

☐ Right to withdraw participation: 4 weeks after interviews/participation, not 2 weeks. (Information and consent form)

These dates have been changed to reflect 4 weeks (17.02.19 for Wicklow, and 17.03.19 for Sligo).

□ **Data storage:** There are issues about data storage. The interviews/focus groups are to be audio recorded.

What type of device will be used?

We will borrow a high quality recording device from UCC.

How will the data be transferred from the recording device to secure storage?

The data will be transcribed.

What form will the secure storage take (an encrypted laptop is a minimum here)?

We will borrow an SoAP laptop that is encrypted.

Is the data being transcribed, and by whom?

Yes, the data will be transcribed. We will be transcribing the data ourselves.

Once the transcripts have been anonymised they can be stored on the UCC onedrive or Google drive which are available through the UCC email accounts for a required period of 10 years.

This has been changed from seven to ten years.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

19. Aims of the project (briefly)

This project is concerned with learning more about democratic education (also known as free schooling) where the children have genuine freedom to spend their days in school as they wish. They run the school with the adults, in that the rules governing the school are set through direct democracy (each person has a vote, so the whole school assembly has genuine powers). We hope to meet with the only 2 democratic schools that exist in Ireland at the moment – Wicklow Sudbury School and Sligo Sudbury School.

Our general questions are as follows:

1. What does a daily life of a democratic school look like?
2. What is the experience of the children attending the school? How does it compare with the experience of the education they had before (of home schooling, of home unschooling, or of mainstream traditional school, depending on the child)?
3. What is the experience of the school staff?
4. What is the experience of the parents? How does it compare with the prior experience of having a child schooled (or unschooled) at home, or of attending mainstream traditional education? What were the parents' motivations for choosing a democratic school for their child?

We propose an ethnographic type study, where we will participate actively in the life of the school for 3-4 days, observing, interacting and asking questions informally, Additionally, we may also hold small focus groups for children who choose to participate, focusing on questions 1 and 2 in particular. School staff and parents may be interviewed more formally, face-to-face or via email. They may also be asked to complete short questionnaires.

20. Brief description and justification of methods and measures to be used. *If applicable, please attach (in APPENDIX 1 below) research questions / copy of questionnaire / interview protocol / discussion guide / etc. materials which the Ethics Committee needs to examine in order to evaluate your application.*

Observations: suitable to an ethnographic type study. We want to be participants in the school for the 3-4 day period.

Focus Groups: possibly groups of 4-5 students – allows for issues/topics to arise which we had not thought of; allows for flow of information within the group – this would be recorded.

Questionnaires: to be able to target particular areas of interest, connected with the research questions, to ask questions about their experience – Susana will include a questionnaire in her study, Clare will not. (Appendix 1)

21. Participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria, detail permissions

Both schools have been contacted by our supervisor, who passed on our request for an opportunity to discuss our study (see appendix 2 - the contact letter). One school (Wicklow) invited us to attend the school meeting, which we did on 19th October. We introduced our project, made a request for a study visit, and distributed our “Information Letter for Students” (see Appendix 3c). Following this, the school agreed to take part in our study through its own democratic process (discussion and vote taking during a school meeting). We are now in the process of finalising the date for our 3-4 day visit to the school. The other school (Sligo) is going to have a discussion and will let us know shortly if we can meet them. The children at the Wicklow school range from the age of 6-18, whereas the children at the Sligo school range from the age of 5-18. Both schools have mixed gender. Parents and staff members will also be asked to participate in the study. Informed consent will be requested directly from the staff (see appendix 3b), while parental consent will be requested on behalf of themselves and the children (see appendix 3a).

22. Concise statement of ethical issues raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them

As this will be an ethnographic type of study, different layers of consent will be involved:

1. At the school meeting on the 19th Oct, we distributed our “Information Letter for Students” (see appendix 3c) to each of the students. Those attending were asked to distribute these letters to the rest of the students so that they would have the information needed in order to vote at their school meeting, whether or not to allow us do our 3-4 day study. As this has been agreed at this stage, we will ask each student to consent individually using the consent form attached to this letter. This will give the students an option to withdraw during the 2 week period from the end of our visit.
2. We also have an “Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents” (Appendix 3a) which we will be distributing to parents in advance of our study, to request consent for both themselves and their children to take part in the study.
3. We have an information note which has already been given to the staff at the school, outlining the nature of the study, and the level of involvement required by the staff (Appendix 2)
4. Finally, we have an “Information Sheet and Consent Form for Staff” (Appendix 3b) which we will be distributing to staff in advance of our study, to request their consent to take part in the study.
5. As the study is ethnographic in nature, it will involve ongoing negotiation of consent, in line with the free and democratic ethos of the school.

Confidentiality: We will identify the schools, but the names of individuals will be omitted or changed to protect participants’ identity.

23. Arrangements for informing participants about the nature of the study (cf. Question 3 above). *If applicable, please attach (in APPENDIX 2 below) the information letter / online statement / other correspondence you wish to use to inform participants about your study.*

As mentioned in point 21, we have already met one school group (Wicklow) in advance of any data collection, to explain the nature of our study. We are attaching a copy of our initial contact letter to the schools, outlining our study (please see Appendix 2)

24. How you will obtain Informed Consent (cf. Question 4 above). *If applicable, please attach (in APPENDIX 3 below) the consent form you wish to use.*

See Appendix 3a for the parental consent form

See Appendix 3b for the staff consent form

See Appendix 3c for the student consent form.

Please see attached example of consent form for parents, and oral consent form for ethnographic studies.

25. Outline of debriefing process (cf. Question 9). If you answered YES to Question 16, give details here. State what you will advise participants to do if they should experience problems (e.g. who to contact for help).

We do not envisage a formal debrief. However, some students have asked us whether they could contact us if they had any queries or needed more information. We have provided our contact details on our information sheets to facilitate such requests.

26. Estimated start date and duration of project

Early December 2018, 4 months

Signed _____
Applicant

Date _____

Signed _____
Applicant

Date _____

Signed _____

Mervin Szarebin
Research Supervisor/Principal Investigator (if applicable)

Date _____

Please submit this form and attachments to admin@psych@ucc.ie, with the words ethics application (followed by your full name) in the subject line. Please include a scan of the signatures required. No hard copies are required.

This form is adapted from pp. 13-14 of *Guidelines for Minimum Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research* (British Psychological Society, July, 2004)

Last update: September 2015