

Alpha Alternative School: Making a Free School Work, in a Public System

Deb O'Rourke

I think my ideal world would have a million little ALPHAs in it. Each one small and kind of different.

This was the reflection of one of ALPHA's original students, interviewed about his experience 40 years later. Growing up in caring places with strong teacher/parent partnerships, many alternative school alumni might feel the same. The Toronto School Board's first alternative school policy called this the *Toronto Experience*:

Alternative school programs in the City of Toronto may be unique in North America because in almost every instance they were initiated by groups of parents, teachers, students and other interested persons who approached the Board of Education for support of experimental programs within the system. (TBE 1978, *Re: General Policy for Alternative School Programs*. p. 3)

D. O'Rourke (✉)
York University, Toronto, Canada

OISE professor Malcolm Levin maintains that Toronto's alternative schools were originally "seen by many as free schools by another name" (1984, p. 7). In the international *free school movement* of the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of these grassroots schools were created, most outside of school systems.

Allen Graubard called A. S. Neill's Summerhill the "grand-daddy of free schools" (1972: 112). Neill's 1960 book *Summerhill: a Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, gave hope to people far beyond the UK. In 1969, I was a student activist in a Calgary organization that, in communication with the students of SEED in faraway Toronto, created a summer free school. The Calgary initiatives did not last. But 15 years later, I was able to enroll my child in a public free school in Toronto. ALPHA later became my place of employment and the subject of my master's thesis. This chapter is drawn from my M.Ed. research, which included interviews with alumni parents, teachers, and students.

WHAT IS A FREE SCHOOL?

Founded in 1921, the private English boarding school Summerhill is described by its founder Neill as "a self-governing school, democratic in form." Its students are free to play, and lessons are optional. But its motto is *freedom, not license*. Children are held responsible for actions that affect others: "Everything connected with social, or group, life, including punishment for social offenses, is settled by vote at the Saturday night General School Meeting ..." (Neill 1969). Summerhill had been operating for 39 years when A.S. Neill wrote that it was no longer an experiment but a "demonstration school, for it demonstrates that freedom works" (Neill 1960: 4). But he never allowed his or Summerhill's name to be used in the schools they inspired, explaining: "If a school is set up simply in imitation of Summerhill, that is wrong ... No school, Summerhill included, is the last word in education" (Snitzer 1972: 13).

Schools inspired by Summerhill each survive on their own terms. Teaching in African-American communities for decades, Jonathan Kozol practiced and wrote about urban free schooling. He found that the key to the acceptability of a free school to low-income and minority parents was the "great debate concerning basic skills."

I found myself aligned with those who argued for a policy of undisguised, sequential, and intentional skill teaching. The haphazard, libertarian

approach of many of the counterculture schools disturbed me greatly. I was convinced that they would shortchange children and drive away poor people. I also feared that they would inevitably drive away large numbers of black parents who were otherwise devoted to the moral and aesthetic aspects of the Free School. (Kozol 1982: 2–3)

Kozol wrote, “Free school, as the opposite of public school, implies not one thing but ten million different possibilities” (1972: 56). Chris Mercogliano and Jerry Mintz of the Alternative Education Resource Organization hold annual courses to help parents and educators to “grow” their schools in the soils of their communities.

A “MOMENT OF POSSIBILITY”

In Ontario in the late 1960s, this soil was unusually fertile. Jonathan Kozol (1972: 5) named Toronto as a locus of the Summerhill-inspired international free school movement. ALPHA’s oral history participants agreed that “*This Magazine is About Schools* [the most prominent of a number of Toronto-based education magazines] and the Hall-Dennis [provincial education] Report, combined with a generation that was just having children that had gone through the sixties as a formative part of their identity” were “major factors in the developing context for the Alternative School movement.” These factors fostered “the sense that citizens could ... initiate policies that best meet their needs.” They motivated people “to think about going to the public system for the creation of alternative forms of education for their kids.” One co-founder recalled: “I think people thought it was a moment of possibility.”

The press identified ALPHA’s co-founders as economically diverse, including “people in public housing and in the hip counterculture, as well as middle-class professionals” (*The Globe and Mail*, Sept 24, 1971). Historically and today, most free schools are independent of public systems. But ALPHA’s founders did not want their school to be “available only to a small and relatively privileged part of society. They wanted a publicly-funded school, hoping to use their political influence to set a precedent for other parents...” (Golden, April 1973: 22). They identified with Toronto’s *Community Schooling* movement, embracing its fundamental goal to “improve the educational system through a process of decentralizing decision-making” (Martell 1970: 76). Community Schooling activists advocated local control of neighborhood schools, so

that “teachers, parents, and older students” could organize curricula that taught the basics, built meaningful “social sciences programs that relate directly” to the neighborhood, and drew on local residents as resource people (1970: 48). Alternative school founders differed from some community schooling activists in their conviction that it was also necessary to start new public schools with pioneering pedagogies, to give different models a chance. Structurally different schools were seen as necessary, to directly address what Ron Miller (2002: 39) described as “a deeply felt sense that the established system of schooling as such was an oppressive institution that thwarted young people’s social, educational, moral, and even intellectual development.”

RESISTING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Radical education critics, often dismissed as romantic, saw the authoritarian, graded structure of public schools as a hidden curriculum, retained and lived when content is long forgotten. Charles Silberman articulated in *Crisis in the Classroom*, “What educators must realize, moreover, is that how they teach and how they act may be more important than what they teach...” (1970: 9). A vocal anti-fascist, Neill felt that coercive schooling prepared students to submit to all forms of totalitarianism, overt and disguised. He argued that the Earth’s and humanity’s salvation were tied to their emotional health: “let the kids be themselves, and in a few generations, the world will become healthy and happy.”

ALPHA: A GROUP CREATION

In notes hand-written in 1971 by an ALPHA co-founder, the “hidden curriculum” is number one under the penciled question “Alternative to what?” *The A.L.P.H.A. Experience*, the proposal approved by the Toronto Board of Education in December 1971, committed to foster “competence” in literacy and arithmetic, “knowledge of the society of which one is a part,” the ability to coordinate and cooperate with others, initiative, and self-respect. Parents wanted their school to “reflect and nurture the values of” cooperation, diversity, freedom of expression, autonomy, and social responsibility. As in the free school movement in the United States, such goals expressed fundamental values of the greater society (Miller 2002: 62). The main difference from the mainstream was that free schools determined to walk their democratic talk, not just

“teach” it within a structure that enforced a hidden curriculum of hierarchy and compliance. ALPHA’s parents took this responsibility by specifying that their school would be governed by a “staff-community council” (The ALPHA Community 1971).

ALPHA’s co-founders argued for their school on the basis of the 1948 *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. They felt “some pause about what we were doing” when they saw that a “homophobic right-wing minister” and a teacher who was a “right wing public voice for education for years through the seventies” were proposing “a parent-run, extremely right-wing program, under the same logic that we were going for...” This is an oft-stated concern, but the solution lies right in the text of the UN Declaration. Article 26 states, “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” Article 29 specifies: “These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”

It was a tough start. Suddenly charged with the care of nearly a hundred frisky, fearless children, ALPHA’s parents described the first year as chaos. In their “interminable” meetings, “We ended up really with these two factions fighting and very much the issue really was over ... how free should a free school be.” This argument was shared with many other alternative schools (Novak 1975: 44–50; Mercogliano 1999: 6; Deal 1975). During its self-named year of chaos, ALPHA’s enrollment halved and its teachers left. But the School Board allowed the remaining parents to continue the struggle. No one involved in ALPHA’s early years takes credit for founding it: All insist it was a group effort. But parents name a teacher hired right after that first year as essential to its survival. I call Susan Garrard ALPHA’s *foundational* teacher: Hired in 1973 and remaining until retirement in 1996, she was an island of stability around whom a staff and parent team was able to coalesce.

“MEETING”: “DOES ANYBODY HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY?”

Susan Garrard recalled that Summerhill-style weekly meetings were not effective, with over 60 students under 13. The solution was “short, sweet daily meetings.”

Being kids, they all had to have their turn. So, we always kept a list of who had had a turn as chairperson, and they would choose the next

chairperson. Later on, it got to be that if you were a little kid you'd have to choose a big kid, or if you were a girl you'd have to choose a boy ...

They found they also needed a kind of sergeant-at-arms, called the "separator." Working together, an experienced kid paired with a small one, the older helped the younger to focus. A parent explained that Meeting was "key to how that place worked."

Parent 1980–1991: All the dynamics got played out there, and approaches to problems got played out there and it was fundamentally important. So how that got shaped was really everything. ...It was their meeting and they chaired it, and made it work.

At Meeting during ALPHA's second year, adults and students together worked out a system for dealing with behavior problems.

COMMITTEE: "WHAT'S HAPPENING?"

With kids moving about, opportunities for conflict arise: so do opportunities to teach conflict resolution. An ALPHA intervention often begins with the blame-free question "What's happening?" From there, the parties each take turns saying their piece without interruption—a common approach to mediation. For situations that, in other schools, can lead to the Principal's office, ALPHA developed *Committee*, a rotating group of five students balanced by age, gender, and experience, listen to the problem and, if the parties cannot resolve it, often decide on a consequence for an offender. All students have a chance to serve on *Committee*.

Freedom to move and student-paced learning help the integration of lively children who might have trouble in mainstream schools, but not always. The 1982 *Alternative Schools, A General Policy*, noted:

Alternative schools are under increasing pressures from social service agencies to take students who have difficulty or who have dropped out of regular school ... Because the schools tend to be small and less impersonal than regular schools, many students adapt well. On the other hand, because of their size, alternative schools face the danger of having to absorb too many "difficult" students too quickly. (The Board of Education for the City of Toronto 1982: 7)

Personal relationships with teachers and direct feedback from peers offered by *Committee* can be effective at helping lively children to learn

to self-regulate. But the collaboration of staff, parental, and administrative is sometimes necessary to access therapeutic resources for children with deep emotional challenges.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In an ungraded school, developmental stages are very visible. On their own, ALPHA's students coalesced into two groups on either side of a developmental watershed that appears at about the age of nine. They are called, simply, the Littlekids (K-3) and Bigkids (grades 4-6). Each has several rooms on separate floors, where they often move about quite freely. Teachers program both independently and collaboratively. Curriculum is often emergent, coming from the children's interests. Much teaching is holistic, organic, and arts-based, but students can also be found working on times tables and math books. Allowing students to choose activities and responding to their successes enables staff to address learning styles quickly and directly. Diagnosis and labeling are required only where a perceptual challenge or a serious behavioral problem indicates a need for extra support.

Free schooling, like any schooling, requires due diligence. A complete free agency to decide when and if they want to be taught seems to work for the private school students of Summerhill and Sudbury Valley (Gray 2008; Lucas 2011). But Kozol argues that proactive literacy teaching is vital in schools with diverse, mobile, and often oppressed populations. Though many kids pick up reading as organically as they learn to speak, Kozol (1972: 30-31) observed: "for as many as one quarter or one-half of the children in a Free School situation, it is both possible and necessary to go about the teaching of reading in a conscious, purposeful and sequential manner." But he also noted: "Twelve years of lockstep labor in the field of math or language arts are manifestly wasteful of a child's learning energies and learning hours. Freire teaches basic literacy in forty days" (pp. 39-40). John Holt argued that children could "gain what we have come to think of as five or six years' worth of ability in reading in a matter of months. They might not all do this when were six years old, but what difference would that make?" (1972: 76). At ALPHA, literacy is approached carefully and proactively, responding to a child's trajectory while resisting faddish assumptions about what students should be doing at particular ages.

EVALUATION: THE TAIL THAT WAGS THE EDUCATION DOG

Until 1996, ALPHA had no report cards. Then, the Ontario Ministry of Education forced its teachers to spend many hours preparing them. They are filed in a drawer. Parents may ask to see their child's report, but they rarely do. A petition to the Director of Education in 18 January 1996, signed by every ALPHA family of that era, stated:

A non-competitive atmosphere is the core of our philosophy. We believe that young children should explore, make mistakes, take risks, and challenge themselves. Comparative grading and standardized testing undermine this learning process and for this reason we firmly oppose these strictures.

American educator Debra Meier would agree:

Learning happens fastest when the novices trust the setting so much that they aren't afraid to take risks, make mistakes or do something dumb. Learning works best, in fact, when the very idea that it's risky hasn't even occurred to kids ... No one is sorting or ranking us, and we are not confronted with much that is out of our family's control, stuff that is arbitrary and could hurt us. (Meier 2002: 18)

ALPHA's traditional evaluation: a family conference, often child-led, is still how the home and school team work out where the student is, where they want to go, and how to help them. The time teachers spend filling out report cards is a drain on the school's small resources, one example of how alternatives are weakened by Board structures.

STUDENTS EVALUATE ALPHA

Periodically, alumni are invited to give feedback on how their transition to subsequent schooling went and how well they feel ALPHA prepared them. This collection of quotes is from such a gathering in March, 1987:

I learned a natural respect for other people.

I learned patience because I had freedom.

I learned to chair meetings ...

Because ALPHA is a smaller school I learned to get closer to people.

I gained more than I knew at the time. Most kids have a narrow band of knowledge. I can look at issues from different angles.

I learned to motivate myself when I really want to.

I learned how to relax in school. I do not form mental tension ...

I learned to use my common sense.

I learned to work at my own pace.

I developed social skills here that enabled me to approach high school teachers and say, "I'm scared, I can't cope. (The ALPHA Community 1987: 27)

Jerry Mintz of Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) pointed out that people involved with democratic schooling "have a different set of criteria" to define success:

We care how happy they are. We care if they know how to get along with other people ... We care if they're creative: we care if they can take responsibility. We have standards: those are ... [our standards]. Another standard is: Does your kid like this school? How about the most basic thing: is the customer satisfied?

THE FAMILY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP: *SHARING EDUCATION*

ALPHA's founding parents "wanted to be a part of their [children's] lives" and felt "it was a much more holistic and a much more natural way of educating our kids." So, ALPHA's motto is *Sharing Education*. Volunteerism is also the only way to alleviate the brutal adult/child ratios in public schools, which Dewey referred to as the "mechanical massing of children" (1900/1990: 34). One of ALPHA's alumni recalled "having a lot of comfort knowing that everybody ... was somebody's mom or dad even if they weren't your mom or dad..." But the close collaboration has challenges. Like any school, ALPHA attracts every kind of family, including, on occasion, deeply dysfunctional ones. The School Board tends to deal with this by herding parents into committees and tasks far from the classroom. But ALPHA's commitment to the vital home/school link resulted in years of work on *The ALPHA Alternative School Community Code of Conduct*, to clarify what parent participation does and does not mean. It was finally adopted in 2012 (The ALPHA Community 2014: 42).

COMMUNITY SCHOOL CONSENSUS GOVERNANCE

A 1979 Board-published brochure declared unequivocally “Parents run ALPHA.” After a decade of trying out formats for a *staff-community council* (informally called the “Parent Meeting”) that satisfied their “horizontal” vision of egalitarian governance, parents with experience in the Quaker community and in peace movements introduced the solution: all-community consensus governance. ALPHA’s open monthly meetings invite all to participate. The only officers are the Finance Committee, who account for the money raised and budgeted by the community. The minute-taker and chair are chosen from those present at each meeting. Issues are talked out until agreement is reached. According to Susan Garrard, democracy is ALPHA’s secret of survival: “If ever that broke down, then everything broke down. I think the fact that people were able to stick to that all through those years is why it’s still going.”

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BUREAUCRACY

The relationship between public school administrators and alternative schools has always been delicate. ALPHA’s initial proposal did not include a principal, but it was “forced to accept at least minimal supervision by a certified principal” (Lind, May 23 1972: 5). Within a bureaucracy that often resorted to “foot-dragging” and information “withheld” (Murray, April 1972: 4) to slow down innovation, there were a few visionaries. Early parents fondly recall Mike Lennox, a superintendent who was temporarily ALPHA’s “principal of record,” reassuring that “anything that was educationally desirable was administratively possible.” Administrator Dale Shuttleworth was “our man in a clutch” who “defended us in that culture.” Sometimes, defense was urgently needed. But often ALPHA got lucky with “arm’s length” principals shared with (and primarily preoccupied with) a neighboring school, but willing to defend ALPHA when necessary. Parents from the 1980s remember “autonomies: space—physically and metaphorically ... we were really left on our own. So for a free school that’s a blessing...” (p. 275).

Unfortunately, even during that “blessed time,” systemic progress was not made in policy. The reverse happened: The 1986 *Provincial Review Report* ... was “generally impressed with the level of commitment and the quality of curriculum delivery in the majority of alternative schools

and programs” (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 14) but then recommended that the structures that fostered these “trusting learning environments” be replaced by “greater congruence of practice (*sic*) with existing legislation and policies” (p. 24). Since then, in tandem with an international neo-liberal globalization and austerity movement, the centralization agenda has strengthened. Administrators encountering alternative schools are often shocked about their lack of compliance to the rituals and methods that most people equate with schooling, and reflexively move to “correct” them. Schools that resist are often labeled *elitist*. Thus, schools tend to lose their identities, not through open debate about methods, but by being forced—regulation by regulation—into conformity with the mainstream. Since ALPHA’s inception, parents have found that much of their volunteer time must be devoted, not to helping students, but to grappling with issues that come from the administration. Many are initially grateful to the system that offers this school. But as they spend wearying amounts of their volunteer time struggling for their model’s survival, their broken trust and stress sometimes grow into anger and cynicism.

MODELS FOR DEMOCRACY

In the words of current community members, ALPHA’s democratic structure *is* its pedagogy: not a hidden curriculum but a conviction openly stated and freely chosen by its families, that expresses its society’s core values. By its nature, democracy cannot be imposed. An alternative educator’s strategy is as democratic as their conviction: to effect change through debate and modeling, instead of imposition. In its first approach to the Toronto Board of Education in 1971, the *ALPHA Community* proposed:

It is our belief that in order to obtain any educational or other form of social progress, new programs should be created on an experimental basis within the system. It cannot be done all over the system at one time. To this end we will be an educational experiment for Toronto schools ... (The ALPHA Community, 1971, *Brief for the Management Committee*, p. 6)

This should not be confused with experimenting *on* children. The most draconian experiments—such as family and cultural deprivation, and long hours of physical and emotional restraint for the very young—continue

to be imposed, not by families and teachers, but by powerful institutions. Alternative and community schooling proponents argue that family and community, not far away authorities, have the greatest stake in the vitality of their children and, as Debra Meier contends, should have “sufficient authority to act on its collective knowledge of its children” (2002: 4).

It is difficult to sustain an “authentic” model, with resource levels set by the mainstream and pressures to conform to its ideologies. A parent whose children attended ALPHA as the 1990s neo-liberal education movements climaxed, noted that even as Canada embraces the inspirational myth of democracy, its culture owes much to a different paradigm:

I remember actually understanding ... we strive for democracies and co-operatives and sensitivities and sensibilities, but in fact we live in hierarchies and that's the structure. And the leader is the moral head who sets the tone ...

But struggle and compromise do not invalidate the model. American researcher Ann Swidler witnessed organizational and cultural innovations in free schools that she felt both reflected and affected the society at large.

Watching teachers and students in free schools, I became convinced that culture, in the sense of symbols, ideologies, and a legitimate language for discussing individual and group obligations, provides the crucial substrate on which new organizational forms can be erected Organizational innovation and cultural change are continually intertwined, since it is a culture that creates the new images of human nature and new symbols with which people can move one another. (Swidler 1979: viii)

Henry Giroux argues, “Schools are one of the few sites within public life in which students, both young and old, can experience and learn the language of community and democratic public life” (1988: xiii). Alternative schools—including free schools with deep structural differences from the mainstream—support a range of possibility. Diversity, fostered instead of fought, could create generous public systems that leave no one out. Inheriting a struggle to bring up children who are “at once individuals and community persons” (Neill 1992: 5), free schools are historic institutions whose very existence engages us in vital confrontations with dilemmas around choice, freedom, community, responsibility,

and authority. They bring to a contemporary context a search for ways to authentically share with our children, society's deepest democratic aspirations.

REFERENCES

- Deal, Terrence E. 1975. *An Organizational Explanation of the Failure of Alternative Schools*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching.
- Dewey, John. (1900/1990). *The school and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Giroux, Henry. 1988. *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Golden, M. 1973. "alpha-bits." *Community Schools*, (April, 1973): 21–24. The Community Schools Workshop of Toronto.
- Graubard, Allen. 1972. *Free the Children: Radical Reform and the Free School Movement*. New York: Pantheon Books (Random House).
- Gray, Peter. 2008. Children Educate Themselves IV: Lessons from Sudbury Valley. *Psychology Today* (blog). <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/200808/children-educate-themselves-iv-lessons-sudbury-valley>. Accessed 4 Jul 2016.
- Holt, John. 1972. *Freedom and Beyond*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Kozol, Jonathan. 1972. *Free Schools*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. Republished in 1982 as *Alternative Schools*. New York: Continuum.
- Kozol, Jonathan. 1982. *Alternative Schools*. New York: The Continuum Publishing.
- Levin, Malcolm. 1984. And Now for Something Completely Different: What's 'Alternative' About Toronto's Alternative Schools? *Mudpie* 5 (7): 7.
- Lind, L. 1972. Experimental Schools: A Motherhood Issue, 5. Toronto: *The Globe and Mail*, May 23.
- Lucas, H. 2011. *After Summerhill: What Happened to the Pupils of Britain's Most Radical School?* Bristol: Herbert Adler Publishing.
- Mercogliano, Chris. 1999. A Profile of the Albany Free School. *Paths of Learning: Options for Families & Communities* 1 (1): 8–13.
- Martell, G. 1970. Community Control of the Schools—Toronto and New York. *This Magazine is About Schools* 4 (3): 7–49.
- Meier, Deborah. 2002. *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Miller, Ron. 2002. *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy after the 1960s*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Murray, E. 1972. Report from the Board: Who Makes Decisions? *Community Schools*, April, 4–5.

- Neill, Alexander Sutherland. 1960. *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. New York: Hart Publishing.
- Neill, Alexander Sutherland. 1969. *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Education*. UK: Victor Gollancz.
- Neill, Alexander Sutherland. 1992. *Summerhill School: A New View of Childhood*, ed. Albert Lamb. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Novak, Mark. 1975. *Living and learning in the free school* 88. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.
- Parents' Group Seeks New Kind of Education. 1971. *The Globe and Mail*, September 24.
- Snitzer, Herb. 1972. *Today is for Children: Numbers Can Wait*. New York: The Macmillan.
- Swidler, Ann. 1979. *Organization Without Authority: A Dilemma of Social Control in Free Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- The ALPHA Community. 2014. *The ALPHA Parent Handbook*. Vol. 2.
- The ALPHA Experience*. 1971. <http://alphaschool.ca/about/history/>. Accessed 22 March 2011.
- The Board of Education for the City of Toronto. 1982. *Alternative Schools, A General Policy*. Toronto: Office of the Director of Education.
- Toronto Board of Education (TBE). 1978. *Re: General Policy for Alternative School Programs*. Toronto: Office of the Director of Education.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Deb O'Rourke is a freelance writer and educator with a Masters in Education from York University and has published journalism, essays, and poetry with NOW Magazine, Rabble, and various fine art and literary publications. Her MEd thesis was a history of ALPHA Alternative School. Her relationship with alternative schooling began in Calgary in 1969, when she created a summer free school with fellow students. It continued with various roles at ALPHA Alternative School from 1985 to the present: as a parent, visiting artist, researcher, staff member, and volunteer.

Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement

Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy

Bascia, N.; Fine, E.S.; Levin, M. (Eds.)

2017, XX, 281 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-54258-4