

## **BOOK REVIEWS: Review Essay**

### **Can This Be School? Fifty Years of Democracy at ALPHA**

**By Deb O'Rourke**

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I remember, as a young U.S. adult, around 1970, thinking that the days of coercive schooling—the forced and uniform lessons, age segregation, unsolicited evaluation, grades as reward and punishment, and the rest that goes with what was (and is) known as standard schooling—were numbered. The air was full of revolutionary ideas about education. A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*, his collection of essays about his radically alternative English boarding school, had been published (in 1960), with a forward of praise by the famous psychologist and social critic Eric Fromm. By 1970 the book had sold over three million copies and was assigned reading in an estimated 600 university courses (Miller, 2002). Other influential books of that time, most of which are still on my bookshelf and recognized by many as classics, include Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and *Compulsory Miseducation* (1964); John Holt's *How Children Fail* (1964), *How Children Learn* (1967), and *Freedom and Beyond* (1972); Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* (1967) and *Free Schools* (1972); Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973); and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971).

It was a heady time for young people looking for social change. Civil rights, social justice, anti-war, anti-greed, and pro-environment movements—often lumped together as “the Movement”—were in full swing. People were experimenting with more gentle, sustainable, democratic ways of living, and more respect and freedom for children was part of that. Now my generation has grown old, and our kids are grown and some of their kids, too, and look what we have done. Ouch!

Largely in response to *Summerhill*, radically alternative schools, commonly called *free schools*, sprouted up throughout North America. In 1971, 320 of them were listed in the *New Schools Directory* (Hausman, 1998). Most of them were small, with about 15 to 60 students, and short-lived. They fell for a variety of reasons. As private schools, ineligible for public funding, many collapsed for financial reasons when the initial idealism wore off and staff began to need paying jobs. Collapses also occurred because of conflicts among parents and staff (Deal, 1975). People who initially believed they had the same vision discovered they didn't agree when ideas turned to practice. Disagreements led some schools to collapse completely and others to compromise such that they lost their free-school identity. Moreover, as the '70s wore on, society began to shift back in a conservative direction and the Movement itself began to lose steam. According to one estimate, the average life span of the free schools that opened in the 1960s and early '70s was 3 years (Miller, 2002); according to another, it was 18 months (Deal, 1975).

Very few of the U.S. schools that opened in that fervent period are operating today while maintaining their original philosophy. The only ones I know of are the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, founded in 1968, and the Albany Free School, founded in 1969. In England, *Summerhill* recently celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of continuous operation. These three successful schools are in many ways quite different from one another (Sudbury Valley is suburban, Albany Free School is inner city, and *Summerhill* is a boarding school), but they are similar in three ways that may account for their longevity (Gray, 2017). All three found ways to bring in enough money to pay staff members; all three developed formal decision-making procedures that included those who were daily members of the school (students and staff) but not parents; and all three had strong-minded, extraordinarily committed founders who stuck with and piloted the school through early difficulties (Daniel Greenberg at SVS, Mary Leue at Albany, and, of course, Neill at *Summerhill*).

And then there's ALPHA, a public democratic school founded in 1972 in Toronto, Ontario, the subject of the book, by Deb O'Rourke, that I'm reviewing here.

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### **Deb O'Rourke**

O'Rourke is well situated for writing this book. She was a teenage leader in a self-governing youth organization and summer free school in the late 1960s, was an ALPHA parent from 1985 to 1995, taught art in over 20 different schools, and rejoined ALPHA in 2004 as a volunteer school coordinator while working on a master's degree in education at York University. Her master's thesis on the culture and history of ALPHA is the academic root from which this book grew.

O'Rourke's research for the thesis and book included examination of school documents, interviews with former and present teachers, parents, and students, and direct observations at the school during her years of involvement there. For anyone interested in the problems and potential triumphs of starting and maintaining a democratically organized school within a large city public school system, or anyone interested in the history of change in attitudes about children and schooling over the past half century, this is a must read. I was delighted to find that the book is truly scholarly, with ample references and notes, yet highly engaging to the reader. O'Rourke clearly loves ALPHA, but the book is not an advertisement. It comes across as a very honest history.

### **Basics of ALPHA**

ALPHA is a democratic public elementary school, governed—in principle and largely in practice—by the school community that includes parents as well as teachers and students. In recent times there have typically been about 80 students, three or four full-time teachers, and varying numbers of parent volunteers at the school. The students' range in age from four to 12. The school ends at 6<sup>th</sup> grade, though over part of its history (1981 to 1995) it included students through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It was initially housed in a single room in a YMCA, but in 1977 moved into two floors of a downtown building previously used as a traditional school, where it still lives today.

The students are nominally assigned to a grade level (K through 6<sup>th</sup>), in accordance with Toronto requirements, but are not segregated by age except that “littlekids” (ages four to eight) generally occupy the upper floor of the building and “bigkids” (ages nine to twelve) the lower floor. The school does not give homework or tests and avoids grading students. Unlike Sudbury Valley and Summerhill, however, the school imposes some academic requirements, though it does so on an individual basis rather than through school-wide rules. The school is committed to ensuring that students can read and are in other ways prepared for 7<sup>th</sup> grade in a standard middle school by the time they graduate from ALPHA. The result is that students at ALPHA, while far freer to choose and direct their own activities than are students in regular elementary schools, are not completely free to do so. O'Rourke seems to express both understanding and some regret about such requirements. She writes (pp. 15-16):

To spare [the students] the barrier [of anxiety about societal expectation when they enter middle school], and to ensure that a genuine disability is spotted, ALPHA staff coerce a little. They make sure that, as the students grow, they regularly sit down to do some developmentally appropriate schoolwork....When ALPHA students grow into bigkids, at about the age of nine, they wrestle with math, French and writing on a daily basis. Over the years, ALPHA alumni reported difficulty in middle school with math and French. So now grade 5-6 students, like other public-school students, spend hours per week daydreaming in, and disrupting, the friendly, informal math and French classes their teachers create for them. I feel sorry for them and their teachers.

Also, unlike Sudbury Valley and Summerhill, parents are involved in the democratic governance of ALPHA. Parent involvement was part of the original plan for community governance. In principle, at least, larger organizational policies, including educational goals and means, are hashed out primarily in periodic meetings involving parents and teachers. I suspect that this, for example, was where pressures for some academic requirements originated. Rules of conduct and other matters of daily living at the school, in contrast, are made by the school Meeting, attended primarily by students and staff. When conflicts arise that students can't work out themselves, any school member can call “Committee,” which entails a meeting of the conflicting parties with a group (Committee) consisting of two littlekids, three bigkids and a teacher, which aims to help the conflicting parties work out a solution. This is the democratic alternative to authoritarian discipline by teachers.

Like many other new schools emphasizing freedom, ALPHA experienced a chaotic first year. It opened with 90 students, who entered a single-room space with no established culture, no well-formed rules or expectations about how to get along. Founding staff of other schools have told me that the first year is a period in which students are testing limits. “What can I get away with here?” A lesson that some founders have conveyed is if you want to start a free or democratic school, start small, and then, as the initial group establishes a culture, gradually build. A large student body is great after a school is well established, such that existing students help enculturate new ones.

The first year is also a time when many of the adults involved in such a school discover their disagreements with one another, and this is especially true when parents have a voice, as was the case at ALPHA. The disagreements can turn to anger. There is always a faction that wants the school to be more like a regular school—a little freedom but not too much. If a democratic school is to retain its founding principles, there must be strong, consistent voices opposing that faction. At ALPHA disputes and chaos in the first year led many of the original families to leave. The next year the school was smaller, somewhat more unified in vision, and things began to settle down.

In O'Rourke's telling, a major force for the school's survival through turbulent early years was Susan Garrard, who was hired as a teacher in the second year and remained there until she retired in 1996. O'Rourke refers to Garrard as the school's "rock," who anchored it to the founding ideas and ideals. She appears to be the A.S. Neill, Mary Leue, and Daniel Greenberg of ALPHA. Democracy does not mean that everyone has equal influence. Powerful, thoughtful, committed voices are needed, even (maybe especially) when they must operate through democratic processes in which others need to be convinced.

### **Political Winds That Sailed and Then Beat Against the School**

A fundamental difficulty with attempting a democratic alternative within a public-school system is that it is forever at the mercy of that system's hierarchy. In the United States, there have been various attempts to create public democratic schools, but most have not lasted long. They were begun at times when political climates, and hence school hierarchies, were open to new ideas, and they ended when the winds changed and top-down rules became more rigid.

#### *The Hall-Dennis Report and the Original Hope of ALPHA*

In Ontario, the 1960s spirit of radical change affected even establishment figures in government and business. According to O'Rourke, the most influential document enabling the founding of ALPHA was a government-sponsored report entitled *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*. It was referred to as the *Hall-Dennis Report*, named after the committee co-chairs—Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada Emmett Hall and school principal Lloyd Dennis. In addition to Hall and Dennis, the committee included not just educators, but others involved in "labor, business, manufacturing, law, accountancy, farming and psychology—all with records of public service in education, on school boards and committees" (p. 60). The report, which resulted from three years of research and was published as a glossy soft-cover book in 1968, was severely critical of existing schooling. O'Rourke (pp. 60-61) quotes the following from the report:

Basically, the school's learning experiences are imposed, involuntary, structured. The pupil becomes a captive audience from the day of entry. His hours are regulated; his movements in the building and within the classroom are controlled; his right to speak out freely is curtailed. He is subject to countless restriction about the days to attend, hours to fill, when to talk, where to sit, length of teaching periods, and countless other rules.

What a remarkable admission from a committee on which a Supreme Court justice was a co-chair. I can't help but wonder if Justice Hall ever considered the possibility that coercive schooling might be found unconstitutional for its violation of human rights. The report went on to outline 258 recommendations for change in schools. If they had been carried out, public schools in Ontario would, today, look nothing like what we still think of as conventional schooling. They would, pretty much, look like ALPHA.

Among other things, according to O'Rourke (pp. 61-62), the report recommended "[eliminating] lock-step systems of organizing pupils, such as grades, streams, programs, etc.,"... "[removing] barriers based on age, freeing children to engage any subject on any level where it interested them,"... and "[abandoning] the use of class standing, percentage marks, and letter grades in favor of parent and pupil counseling as a method of reporting individual progress." Unfortunately, the report did not outline a set of steps for achieving such changes. Its main practical effect, however, was implicit permission for school boards to experiment with alternative schools that might try out these recommendations on a small scale. This was a wedge that gave ALPHA its start.

The hope, at the beginning, not just of the parents and teachers who pushed for ALPHA but also of many on the Toronto School Board, was that this new alternative would, over time, influence the rest of the school system to move in directions recommended by the Hall-Dennis report. Sadly, that has not happened.

#### *The Winds They Are a Blowin' in the Wrong Direction*

Just as was occurring in the United States, the winds that had encouraged innovation in the 1960s and early '70s began changing in the late '70s and early '80s. Society began moving in a conservative direction, and that included a push toward ever more restrictions on what teachers and students could do in public schools. O'Rourke writes that a hint

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of what was to follow came in the wording of a 1982 *General Policy Report* handed down from the School Board. While praising the existence of community meetings at alternative schools, it stated that such meetings “provide the opportunity to air grievances, socialize, express opinions, and suggest improvements.” The implication, of course, was that such meetings could provide suggestions to the higher-ups in the hierarchy but could not make actual decisions.

That report was followed four years later by a 1986 *Provincial Review Report of Alternative School Programs*, which praised the meaningful learning at alternative schools, but then admonished such schools for failures to follow Ministry requirements. And then, in 1987, a draft *Issues Paper on Alternative Schools* listed some of the Ministry’s requirements, including requirements for “developmental and sequential” instruction, “detailed courses of study based on Ministry guideline,” “formal testing and other methods of student assessment,” and maintenance of an “ongoing student record for each student.”

Although ALPHA staff, led by Susan Garratt, managed for the most part to fight off such demands, the necessity to do so increased the already high workload of the staff, seemed to reflect a betrayal on the part of the larger school system, and created continuous anxiety about the school’s future. As an example of the unnecessary work created, O’Rourke describes how teachers at ALPHA took on the senseless task of regularly creating report cards for each student to meet a bureaucratic demand. After creating them, the staff file the cards away in a drawer without showing them to anyone, as such reports run counter to the school’s operating principles. Parents and students can look at them if they want, but, fortunately, few do.

It seems ironic, but not surprising to anyone familiar with bureaucracies, that the Toronto Board and Ontario Ministry claim to be happy with the educational effectiveness of ALPHA and other alternative schools in the system, but unhappy with their failure to follow the rules handed down by bureaucrats who have little understanding of how the school operates. O’Rourke (p. 198) sees this as the “prioritization of management over students.” In elaborating further, she writes (p. 204): “There are powerful personal and economic interests at work in bureaucracies, from the tops of the hierarchies to the administrators at their desks. Management cultures then and now are ensconced in ideologies of hierarchy and standardization that richly reward the top echelons.” She also quotes Everett Reimer’s (1971) observation that because of the habitual behaviors of bureaucracies, “the world can be worse than the people who live in it.”

### Concluding Thought

I see O’Rourke’s book as a nonfiction equivalent of a good historical novel. It tells the story of a particular individual—though in this case it is an individual school rather than person—in a way that illustrates and allows us to experience, vicariously, the changing cultural pressures of the time. The book is about ALPHA, but more than that it is about the history, over the past half century, of attitudes towards children and their education, about trust and distrust. It is also a story about success and failure—the success, so far, of a little school and the failure of a big society to really look at that school and learn from it. To the great credit of the people involved with ALPHA, the school lives on, holding rather closely to its original philosophy; but, as O’Rourke says near the end of the book (p. 241), “There is always tension at ALPHA about the next project that might be on the drawing boards of the School Board and the Provincial Ministry.”

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