

**Albany Free School Alumni -Life Outcomes**  
Kristan A. Morrison  
Radford University, U.S.

**Abstract** *This article is a report on data collected in a survey of 18 alumni of the Albany Free School (AFS) (participants were 18 years or older at the time of the survey and had attended the AFS for at least 3 years). The AFS is a democratic free school where students are free to develop their own unique curriculum in a self-directed fashion. Critics of such schools fear for the future possibilities of students; however, proponents of this model claim that students' life outcomes are not hampered by such alternative approaches to education. Advocates argue that the graduates of democratic free schools are amply prepared for a variety of choices in life, including attending institutions of higher education, pursuing a career that they find personally meaningful, and engaging in fulfilling relationships. This study corroborates those claims and shows, through an analysis of the quantitative data collected in this survey that life outcomes are positive for the alumni of the AFS, that the graduates are unimpeded in obtaining further education should they decide to seek it and are often successful in their higher education studies; have satisfying careers in a wide range of fields with the number of those becoming artists or entrepreneurs disproportionate to the general population of conventional-school attending people; and generally are eager to engage in lifelong learning. These findings thus add to the evidence that the democratic free school educational mode seems to be one that results in positive life outcomes for the alumni as well as for society overall, and is not a model to fear (as many of its critics seem to do). Future work analyzing the collected qualitative data will be discussed as well.*

**Keywords:** free schools, alumni survey, democratic school, educational alternatives

**Introduction**

In the Fall of 2003, I traveled from North Carolina to Albany, New York to begin my dissertation research on the Albany Free School (AFS), a private school with a vastly different approach to learning than I had experienced my whole life as a student (K-12 and university-level) and as teacher in U.S. public schools. The AFS is an example of a democratic free school where children are not compelled, as they are in conventional schools, to follow a standardized curriculum; rather, they may choose what, when, and how they study something. If they so wish, they can completely abstain from attending

classes, taking tests, or getting grades. I spent three months as an intern teacher/participant observer researcher at the school, taking field notes, examining written records, conducting interviews with teachers and students, and immersing myself in the life of the school community. The following year, I completed my PhD program and began teaching at the university level in teacher-preparation programs. I turned my experiences at the AFS into a book manuscript and in 2007, the State University of New York Press published it under the title *Free School Teaching: A Journey into Radical Progressive Education*. I have since continued to study similar schools and unschooling (the homeschooling version of free schools) while helping to prepare pre-service teachers for their futures in (mostly) public schools. I use information gained from my time at the AFS to help my students see that education does not just need to be one set way, that alternatives exist and thrive and that their own philosophies of and approaches to education can be varied.

“What happens to the students when they grow up?” is one of the first questions that I am asked, whenever I talk to my students or others about my time at the AFS. This is the concern of many people who encounter democratic free schools. For example, Gray and Chanoff, in their research on alumni of the Sudbury Valley School, (1986) wrote,

People do not want to take chances with their children. When parents and teachers see that children, genuinely given a choice, do not choose to engage in the kinds of activities that everyone thinks of as “school activities,” they understandably become nervous. “What if my child falls behind and can’t catch up? Maybe he is being spoiled in this school, developing lazy habits, lack of discipline. Perhaps he will be unable to get into college, get a job, keep a job. His life may be ruined.” In many ways, conventional schooling may not be appealing, but at least it is known, and the known is less frightening than the unknown. (Gray & Chanoff, 1986, p. 183)

And, after publication of my book, one book reviewer similarly expressed concerns, saying

Alas, one thing Morrison does not do in the final chapter is reveal what happens to students from the Albany Free School once they leave at the end of eighth grade. Do they enter the traditional public school system? Is there another radical progressive school option for them? How do they fare in a new context? What happens to them once they finish secondary school? Are they successful academically? Do they become active and engaged citizens? Is there evidence that their early school experiences were transformative? While that is material perhaps for another study, readers are left pondering these “so what” questions. Does such a dramatic departure from the traditional approaches to schooling make a meaningful difference? If the author had given at least a glimpse of how these questions were answered, it

might make the book more provocative. (Knapp, 2007, para. 9)

I was unable to systematically answer that until now. At the time of the publication of my book, I only had anecdotal information from some of the children I kept in touch with, and there were only a few scholarly studies of democratic free school alumni that I could reference. Since that time, more studies have emerged of free school and unschooling outcomes, and the children with whom I worked at the AFS in 2003 are now aged 18 to 30. I decided that the time had finally come to seek answers for myself about the life outcomes of students who had attended the AFS.

### **Purpose of This Study/Review of Relevant Literature**

As mentioned above, I have long wondered what happened to the children I had met at the AFS. Were they, as former school director Chris Mercogliano argued in his 1998 book entitled *Making It Up as We Go Along*, “a generation...free of race and class prejudice, free of an overdependence on material things as the basis for the good life[?][And did they embrace] education as a process that encourages learning for learning’s sake and enables children to develop fully and authentically”? (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 2). And do the students, as the school website claims, become people who “follow their dreams, contribute positively to society, and become voices for change”? (<https://www.albanyfreeschool.org/>).

In this study, I set out to explore the life outcomes of AFS alumni (regarding employment/ career, family/interpersonal relationships, and civic engagement) and their perceptions/ judgements of unconventional schooling. My hope was that this study would provide valuable insights into what sort of people are nurtured at the AFS, whether their life outcomes are enhanced or harmed by such a school, and whether these alumni valued taking part in such an unusual form of education. The answers to these questions may have an impact on the public education sector, especially as some public and charter schools exist that are branching out into different approaches to education (Boston Public Schools, n.d.; Wagner & Dintersmith, 2016), and especially as our society engages more in existential questions on the purposes of education within a highly automated, post-industrial economy (Lerner, 2020; Matusov, 2020; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2020).

### **What is the Democratic Free School Philosophy in Brief?**

I first encountered the philosophy behind democratic free schooling in my doctoral coursework when I read A. S. Neill's *Summerhill School: A New View of Childhood*, and then encountered the concept (and the philosophies behind it) in the works of John Holt, Ivan Illich, George Leonard, John Taylor Gatto, Matt Hern, Chris Mercogliano, George Dennison, and Daniel Greenberg. Democratic free school proponents reject the conventional transmission philosophy of learning (Miller, 2004) where “objective” facts broken down into discrete, fragmented chunks, are memorized and then regurgitated. To democratic free schoolers (and many Progressive educators), learning is the construction of knowledge or meaning through activities that stem from an individual’s choices and

interests. By constructing knowledge, the proponents argue, individuals also construct themselves, a process called individuation (Lamm, 1972), and in being allowed to individuate, these students are in a better position to help create a world different from the one we now have, perhaps a world that has a different “bottom line”—different from our current society’s overwhelming focus on profit maximizing and social mobility (Lerner, 2020).

Democratic free schoolers further argue that when conventional educators force children to engage with, memorize, and then regurgitate fragmented information, the students are being forced to engage in a socialization process—molding them into what it means to be a person in our society. More often than not, the reified knowledge imposed on students does not long remain, but the molding of their identities does. Authors who espouse the concepts of democratic free schooling challenge readers to critically reflect on their own educations. They ask “Can’t we all remember times when we memorized something for a test and immediately after the test forgot all about it?” But they assert that we *did* learn something from these experiences, not specific academic content, but rather the lessons of the hidden curriculum—the unstated norms, values, and beliefs of the society, such as “do as you’re told without question,” and “get into the practice of seeking extrinsic rewards, for that is what real life in a capitalistic society is all about” (Gatto, 1992; Giroux, 1978; Illich, 1971; Jackson, 1968). According to proponents of democratic free schooling, the conventional educators’ conception of education is for the purpose of perpetuating the status quo, a status quo that they find objectionable in a free and diverse democracy. These educators argue that education should foster the pursuit of truth along many different paths, promoting creativity, openness to conflicting perspectives, and the development of strong critical capacities.

### **Research on Alumni of Democratic Free Schools**

While alumni research on students who attend democratic free schools is not overly abundant, it is not completely absent either. A number of such schools have attempted to track their past graduates’ life outcomes. Studies have been done by and about the Sudbury Valley School (SVS) (Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992; Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005; Greenberg, n.d.; Holzman, 1997) and other schools, both those modeled after the SVS and those un-connected (Circle School, 2015; Gray, Riley & Curry-Knight, 2021; Hope, 2018; Lucas, 2011; Mercogliano, 2003; Rietmulder, 2019), including one public democratic/open school (Posner, 2009). This literature collectively argues that life outcomes are positive for the alumni of these schools, that the graduates lead personally satisfying and happy lives; feel good about themselves; are engaged in positive and productive friend, romantic, and professional relationships; are tolerant and interested in justice and active citizenship; are resilient and adaptive to change; feel confident about and in control of their lives; are unimpeded in obtaining further education should they decide to seek it and are often successful in their higher education studies; have satisfying careers in a wide range of fields with the number of those becoming artists or entrepreneurs disproportionate to the general population of conventional-school attending people; have positive regard for the

unconventional schooling they received; and generally are eager to engage in lifelong learning (Circle School, 2015; Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Gray, Riley, & Curry-Knight, 2021; Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992; Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005; Greenberg, n.d; Holzman, 1997; Hope, M. 2018; Lucas, 2011; Mercogliano, 2003; Posner, 2009; Prud'homme, 2012; Thomson-Smith, 2010).

There are caveats to these findings, though; for example, establishing a causal relationship between the school's approach and the life outcomes of its alumni is impossible (Chertoff, 2012). The data in these studies (including this one) is often anecdotal and thus heavily subjective, and self-selection bias suggests the possibility that only those most happy and successful in life take part in such studies and thus skew the overall results. Further, there is the possibility that the students studied were innately dispositioned toward self-control and that the democratic free school environment was a positive match for them (Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Oppenheimer, 2014). Another limitation to the findings of the research done (and potentially this research) is that many of the studied alumni's families had the cultural and social capital to make the privileged choice of sending their child to a private school (even if tuition was close to zero). This cultural and social capital may have also allowed the studied alumni to be "successful" wherever life took them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Wilson, 2015, 2016).

## **Methodology**

### **Original Research Site: The Albany Free School**

The Albany Free School, as mentioned earlier, is a private school in Albany, New York. It serves children who are preschool ages to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Chris Mercogliano, former director of the school, details the school's history in his 1998 book *Making It Up as We Go Along*. The school began in 1969 as a homeschool in the home of Mary Leue. Her son was unhappy with his school, so he asked his mother to teach him at home and she agreed. After a bit of bureaucratic wrangling, Leue got official sanction for home schooling her child. A friend soon asked Leue to take on her three children who were also unhappy with their schooling experiences; and over the next few years, other adults and students joined, and the school was born. The baseline philosophy of the school developed out of the teachers' beliefs about education and society. Many of the teachers had read about and been intrigued by A. S. Neill's Summerhill School, the Modern School (anarchist) in New York City at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the histories of various other holistic/progressive educational movements. They wanted to develop a school that exemplified some of the tenets of these schools and movements. Leue and the other teachers were very active in the struggles for democracy and humanity (e.g., Civil Rights movement, Women's Rights movement, etc.) that arose in the 1960s. They wanted a school that typified the values of those movements: dignity and autonomy for all people through empowerment and individual choice, as well as a sense of communion with others and the natural world. The teachers envisioned an egalitarian model in which children would be free of competition, compulsory learning, and social class-based status rewards. They thought that school should be a place where the

students could choose responsibly from open-ended sets of options, because only in this way would they ever learn to chart their own life courses (Mercogliano, 1998).

The Albany Free School is unique amongst democratic free schools in the United States in that it is located in a very low-income community and offers a sliding scale tuition that can slide all the way to zero for families interested but unable to pay (Davis, 2017; Mercogliano, 1998). This enables the school to have a diverse student body, but also limits it to a shoestring budget. Given this economic reality, the school has grown and shrunk in enrollment over the years. At the time that I interned at and researched the school in the fall of 2003, there were approximately 55 pre-kindergarten to grade eight students, about seven to eight paid teachers, a paid cook, and numerous temporary and full-time volunteer/intern teachers. In 2019, I visited the school and found about 40 students, 4 paid teachers, and a paid part-time cook.

### Data Collection and Analysis

In 2019, I began to engage in a convenience sampling with snowball recruitment of AFS alumni. Starting with Facebook contacts and individual email addresses of AFS alumni, teachers, and parents that I have accumulated since my time researching the school in 2003, I issued invitations to former students who were at least 18 years old and had attended the Albany Free School for at least three years. I asked them to take part in a qualitative study involving semi-structured narrative interviews (or a survey format, if they preferred to answer questions in writing), and I invited them to put me in contact with any other alumni that they knew of to take part. I reached out directly to over 50 alumni and a handful of other alumni were also given the information in a second-hand manner. Eighteen individuals provided informed consent to take part either by answering the questions via Qualtrics survey software (three participants) or engaging in a 60-90 minute phone interview with me (15 participants). The interview questions were a mixture of questions seeking quantitative answers and those seeking qualitative responses (for list of questions, see Appendix A).

After conducting the phone conversations, I transcribed them verbatim, combined them with the written survey responses, and then analyzed the data in two ways. For the quantitative questions (parts of #1 and all of #3 in Appendix A), I computed average responses, and then for the qualitative questions (the remainder), I analyzed the data by reading through all the transcripts and written responses, identifying initial themes, then re-reading all documents to code answers for these themes and generalized conclusions (Gibbs, 2007).

In my survey/interview questions included in this data collection, I was seeking both broad, more quantitative, information about the life outcomes of alumni as well as specific issues and articulations that tied their experiences to one another that could be explored in more depth. The focus of this manuscript's analyses is based on the quantitative survey responses related to the alumni's life outcomes. Future work will analyze specific themes that emerged from the qualitative data.

## **Findings/Applicable National Comparisons and Discussion**

### **Who Are the Studied Alumni? How Do They Value Their Connection With Others?**

As mentioned above, 18 alumni took part in the study—Table 1 depicts some of their demographic details. As one can see in the table, respondents were a roughly even mixture of male and female. Of note, though, is that the overwhelming majority of respondents are white, which is inconsistent with the racial breakdown of the school (at the time of my original study in 2003, approximately 25% of the students were people of color). Reasons for the over-representation of white alumni are unclear. Perhaps because I am a white woman, more alumni felt comfortable responding to the invitation to participate? Or was there something about my sampling technique that only drew in white respondents?

Regarding marital status, the percentages of participants who were married, divorced, separated, or never married is consistent with national averages for the age range of 19-44 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). In terms of having children, 27% of AFS alumni had children under age 18 at the time of the interview, whereas only 13.3% of U.S. households in 2019 had children under 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). Based on the sample of AFS alumni studied, AFS alumni seem to be two times more likely to have children under the age of 18 in their household than the average American in the same age range. Explanations for the findings about marital status, and number can perhaps be linked to the questions about how the alumni rank the importance of relationships in their lives. The interview/survey asked alumni multiple questions to get a sense of how they perceive the importance of relationships, and how they think the AFS impacted their ability to form relationships. Alumni were asked: “on a scale of 1-10, how important are relationships in your life?” and “how would you currently rank, from most important (1) to least important (6), the following: family, money, work, serving/helping others, relationships, and lifelong learning?” The average answer to the first question was 8.97 (out of 10); the average ranking for family was very high at 1.35, next was relationships with an average ranking of 2.14, and then for serving/helping others the average ranking was 3.47. Perhaps there were factors present at the AFS that may have led to such answers regarding inter-personal relationships (e.g., the abundant time available to interact with peers; the more relaxed relationships between adults and children in the school; the conflict resolution practices modeled, etc.); these factors will be explored in more depth in future manuscripts focused on the qualitative responses. At the very least, though, these survey findings seem to confirm the claim of democratic free school proponents that adult alumni of such schools are able to engage in personally satisfying interpersonal relationships.

### **Education and Value of Learning (Formal and Informal) Post AFS**

As mentioned earlier, the AFS only goes up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade (approximately age 14). So, where did the alumni go after they graduated? Table 2 depicts the varying post-AFS educational trajectories of the alumni studied. While the sample size is, again, quite

small, the data depicted in Table 2 indicate that the alumni studied exceed the 2019 national averages in the number completing high school or higher (in this sample, 100% attained this level as compared to 94% nationwide), and exceeded the 2019 averages in the number completing a Bachelor's degree or higher (in this sample, 58% attained this level as compared to 39% nationwide) (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Further, AFS alumni who attended (or were currently enrolled in) higher education had an average GPA of 3.4 whereas the average U.S. college/university student GPA has been around 3.15 (Rojstaczer, 2016).

The survey/interview questions also asked the alumni to respond to questions related to learning and education. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being least positive/important and 10 being most positive/important), alumni rated the influence of the AFS on their post-AFS academic experiences on average as 7.45, and the importance of continual learning in life at 9.4. Further, when asked: "how would you currently rank, from most important (1) to least important (6), the following: family, money, work, serving/helping others, relationships, and lifelong learning?", the average ranking for lifelong learning was 3.66, only behind family, relationships, and serving/helping others in the ranking. This high ranking of lifelong learning by AFS alumni seems consistent with how the American public views itself in terms of continuous learning. While not a completely consistent comparison, the Pew Research Center's 2015 Education Ecosystem data set reports that 73% of American adults surveyed said the phrase "I think of myself as a lifelong learner" applies "very well" to them and another 20% say it applies "somewhat well."

The data presented above is consistent with the extant research literature on democratic school alumni and seem to indicate that alumni of the Albany Free School appear to have been unimpeded in obtaining post-secondary education when they decided to seek it, and the average reported GPA of 3.5 (out of 4.0) at the higher education level seems to indicate that those who chose this route were quite successful in their higher education studies. Perhaps the higher GPAs, and the higher levels of going to and completing college are tied to the non-representative sample of alumni found in this study. Again, though, at the very least, these survey findings seem to confirm the claim of democratic free school proponents that adult alumni of such schools are able to successfully gain access to higher education and excel while there.

### **Occupational Outcomes and Satisfaction with Current Work**

What sort of work do AFS alumni do as adults? Table 4 shows the outcomes for the studied participants. And Table 5 compares the alumni's areas of employment with national figures.

A simple conclusion that one can draw from Tables 4 and 5 is that the alumni have careers in a wide range of fields. The small sample size and the self-selection bias inherent in the data collection perhaps skew the comparison in favor of management, professional and other related fields, as in each of the occupation subfields in that category the representation of AFS alumni is at least eight times the national average. The highest difference between the percentage of AFS alumni occupations and national



population occupation statistics is in the area of the arts, where AFS alumni seem to be 12 times more likely to pursue careers in art, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations. This latter finding is consistent with research done on the alumni of other democratic free schools (Circle School, 2015; Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005; Holzman, 1997; Lucas, 2011; Posner, 2009).

Participants also answered a quantitative question about their satisfaction with their current work. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most satisfied, the alumni reported the scores depicted in Table 6. The most comparable national study to this question was done by the Pew Research Center in 2012 among 18-34 year-olds (Pew Research Center, 2012, Question 11 about satisfaction with current job). Pew did a Likert Scale for this question, while this survey asked respondents for a score of 1-10; the two can be compared if a score of 7.5-10 is considered completely satisfied, 5-7.5 as somewhat satisfied, 2.5-5 as somewhat dissatisfied, and 1-2.5 as completely unsatisfied. In the Pew study, 31% of the respondents rated themselves as completely satisfied. In this study of AFS alumni, 100% of the respondents rated themselves at a 7.5 or above (equivalent to completely satisfied). Thus, it seems that the respondents in this study are significantly more satisfied with their jobs than the general public (sample size difference makes this comparison quite tenuous, though). Somewhat paradoxically, though, when asked to rank, from least to most important in their current lives, family, money, work, serving/helping others, relationships, and lifelong learning, work ranked on average 4.26 (out of 6).

Explanations for more alumni going into the arts, high levels of job satisfaction, and low ranking of the importance of work (*vis-à-vis* the other items) will be explored in future work in which I will explore the qualitative survey responses. At this point, I can only conjecture that, similar to other democratic free school alumni (e.g., in Gray & Chanoff, 1986), AFS alumni pursued careers in the arts because they may have had more time to explore and deeply engage in these interest areas during their time at the Free School. Further, the AFS' environment that encouraged creativity, originality, and doing things for intrinsic motivations (as opposed to the hyper-competitive milieu often found in conventional schools in the United States) may have led to alumni pursuing work that they found personally satisfying while also balancing other priorities in life.

### **Overall Satisfaction with Life and Positive Influence of AFS on Life**

In addition to being asked about their satisfaction with their current work, alumni were also asked to rate their satisfaction with life overall (also on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being most satisfied). The studied alumni's average score was 8.5. This is higher than the OECD Better Life Index's (2022) average for U.S. residents, which is 6.9. While there is no way to determine what type of schools the OECD respondents attended, national statistics do indicate that anywhere from 87-92% of U.S. residents attend conventional, public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Thus, one can extrapolate that approximately 90% of the respondents were public school attendees and they scored their life satisfaction at least 1.5 points lower (out of 10) than did alumni of one democratic free school. What accounts for this difference? Perhaps the AFS had

something to do with this, perhaps not. When asked how they would rate their perceived overall positive influence of the AFS on their lives, the surveyed AFS alumni reported an average of 8.44 (on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being most positive). As mentioned with all previous findings, future work will delve more into the factors present at the AFS that may have led to such a higher score of life satisfaction for the alumni and what the AFS had to do with their satisfaction. What I can indicate from initial analysis of the qualitative data is that many of the alumni gave the school credit for helping them find their life's meaning or purpose. They believed that AFS gave them support and valued them, that the school helped them develop healthy and positive interpersonal skills, prepared them adequately (although not perfectly) for transitioning to conventional academic environments, and allowed them to enjoy and benefit from a happy childhood. Again, this seems to confirm democratic free school advocates' beliefs that their type of education is better primed to lead to positive outcomes for its graduates than conventional schools are.

### **Implications/Limitations/Future Research**

There are caveats to the findings discussed above, similar to those in the other research on democratic school alumni. As Chertoff (2012) maintained, establishing a causal relationship between the school's approach and life outcomes of alumni is impossible. The self-selection bias along with over-representation of white respondents suggests that only those with the most cultural capital in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), as well as the happiest and most successful in life take part in such studies, thus skewing overall results. For example, some survey respondents mentioned in response to the open-ended, qualitative questions that their parents supplemented their academic education at home with things like worksheets in math and assistance in writing. Further, having the time to engage in research is a form of cultural capital, one that not all possible participants may have had. Sadly, with this sort of research, a truly representative sample is difficult to achieve, especially without a much more intrusive methodology.

Many of the findings of this study are consistent with the literature detailed earlier regarding life outcomes of democratic/free school alumni. It thus helps to add to the evidence that the free school educational mode seems to result in positive life outcomes for alumni as well as for society overall, and is not a model to fear (as many people do). The Covid-19 pandemic has deepened teachers' and families' frustrations and burnout related to conventional schools. The rise in homeschooling (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022) provides evidence that perhaps our culture is changing, and a "self-organizing revolution" (Miller, 2014) valuing more progressive/democratic education is underway.

Future research will focus on analyzing the open-ended, qualitative questions asked in the survey and will explore what the alumni would have liked the school to have done differently and why. It will also explore such things as how AFS alumni view social justice; what led respondents' parents down the pathways to sending their child to the AFS; whether different eras of attendance significantly influenced alumni skills, attitudes and beliefs; do the alumni see this sort of school as "scalable" to broader society; and how did children with special learning needs fare at such a school?

## References

- Boston Public Schools. (n.d.). What is a pilot school? <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/4682>
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. Sage Publications Inc
- Chertoff, E. (2012, December 12). No teachers, no class, no homework; would you send your kids here? <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/12/no-teachers-no-class-no-homework-would-you-send-your-kids-here/265354/>
- Circle School (2015). Graduates in 2015: College attendance, academic degrees, and occupations [PDF file]. <https://circleschool.org/wp-content/uploads/Circle-School-Grads-in-2015-July-30-2015.pdf>
- Davis, R. (2017, June 30). Dreams of a “real community.” *Greenfield Recorder*. <https://www.recorder.com/Dreams-of-a-real-community-11023929>
- Gibbs, G. R., (2007). *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. SAGE Publications, Ltd
- Giroux, H. (1978). Developing educational programs: Overcoming the hidden curriculum. *Clearinghouse*, 52(4), 148-151.
- Gray, P. & Chanoff, D. (1986). Democratic schooling: What happens to young people who have charge of their own education? *American Journal of Education* 94(2), 182-213.
- Gray, P., Riley, G., & Curry-Knight, K. (2021). Former students’ evaluations of experiences at a democratic school: Roles of the democratic processes, staff, and the community of students. *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 10 (2), 4-25.
- Greenberg, D. & Sadofsky, M. (1992). *Legacy of trust: Life after the Sudbury Valley School experience*. Sudbury Valley School Press.
- Greenberg, D., Sadofsky, M., & Lempka, J. (2005). *The pursuit of happiness: The lives of Sudbury Valley alumni*. Sudbury Valley School Press.
- Greenberg, D. (n.d). Outcomes. <https://sudburyvalley.org/essays/outcomes>
- Hern, M. ed. (1996). *Deschooling our lives*. New Society Publishers.
- Holzman, L. (1997). *Schools for growth*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hope, M. A. (2018). *Reclaiming freedom in education : Theories and practices of radical free school education*. Routledge
- Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. Harper and Row.
- Jackson, P. (1968, 1990). *Life in schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Knapp, P. (2007, November 14). *Book review of “Free School Teaching.”* <https://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=14766>
- Lerner, M. (2020). Don’t waste an economic meltdown: A strategy to replace capitalism. *Tikkun*. [https://www.tikkun.org/dont-waste-an-economic-meltdown?fbclid=IwAR0WIVWNmk-f\\_KDjiN3CTALPDdaCPvw2GUz6X\\_NsgTj3mzb2z\\_x7GCmCBYY](https://www.tikkun.org/dont-waste-an-economic-meltdown?fbclid=IwAR0WIVWNmk-f_KDjiN3CTALPDdaCPvw2GUz6X_NsgTj3mzb2z_x7GCmCBYY)
- Lucas, H. (2011). *After Summerhill: What happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school?* Pomegranate Books.

- Matusov, E. (2020). *Envisioning education in a post-work leisure-based society: A dialogic perspective*. Palgrave.
- Mercogliano, C. (1998). *Making it up as we go along: The story of the Albany Free School*. Heinemann.
- Mercogliano, C. (2003). *Teaching the restless: One school's remarkable no-Ritalin approach to helping children learn and succeed*. Beacon Press.
- Miller, R. (2004). Educational alternatives: A map of the territory.  
<http://www.educationrevolution.org/store/resources/alternatives/mapoflandscape/>
- Miller, R. (2014). *Self-organizing revolution: Common principles of the educational alternatives movement*. Alternative Education Resource Organization.
- Morrison, K. (2007). *Free school teaching: A journey into radical progressive education*. State University of NY Press.
- Neill, A.S. (1960). *Summerhill*. Penguin Books.
- Neill, A.S. and Lamb, A. (ed.). (1992). *Summerhill School: A new view of childhood*. St. Martin's Press.
- OECD Better Life Index. (2022, February 16). *Life satisfaction*.  
<https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/life-satisfaction/>
- Oppenheimer, J. (2014, January 5). Would you send your kids to a school where students make the rules? <https://newrepublic.com/article/116015/sudbury-valley-school-alternative-education-right-my-kids>
- Pew Research Center. (2012). *Young, underemployed and optimistic: Coming of age, slowly, in a tough economy*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2012/02/young-underemployed-and-optimistic.pdf>
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *Oct. 13-Nov. 15, 2015 – Educational ecosystem*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/dataset/october-2015-educational-ecosystem/study>
- Posner, R. (2009). *Lives of passion, schools of hope*. Sentient Publications
- Prud'homme, M.A. (2012). Students doing conflict resolution? A case study in a free school. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 11(1).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/csee.2012.11.1.22>
- Rietmulder, J. (2019). *When kids rule the school: The power and promise of democratic education*. New Society Publishers.
- Rojstaczer, S. (2016). *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*.  
<https://www.gradeinflation.com/>
- Sukarieh, M. & Tannock, S. (2020). Deschooling from above. *Race and Class*, 61(4), 68-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396819889294>
- Thomson-Smith, C. (2010). An examination of participatory self-government as a pedagogic tool with special reference to Sudbury Valley and Summerhill Schools [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Örebro Universitet.  
<https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:396422/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, Sept. 28). *Labor force statistics from the current population survey*. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat09.htm>

- U.S. Census Bureau. (2019a). *American community survey, marital status data*. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=marital%20status&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1201>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2019b). *American community survey, selected social characteristics in the United States*. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Families%20and%20Living%20Arrangements&tid=ACSDP1Y2019.DP02>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Household pulse survey: Measuring social and economic impacts during the Coronavirus pandemic*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html>
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *Private elementary and secondary school enrollment and private enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment in public and private schools, by region and grade level: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2017*. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_205.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_205.10.asp)
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Educational attainment of young adults*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/caa>
- Wagner, T. & Dintersmith, T. (2016). *Most likely to succeed: Preparing our kids for the innovation era*. Scribner
- Wilson, M. A. F. (2015). Radical democratic schooling on the ground: pedagogical ideals and realities in a Sudbury school. *Ethnography and Education*, 10(2), 121–136. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2014.959978>
- Wilson, M. A. F. (2016). The traces of radical education: Neoliberal Rationality in Sudbury student imaginings of educational opportunities. *Critical Education*, 7(6). <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186143>

## **Appendix A - Survey/ Narrative Interview Questions**

1. demographic information of participants (age; gender; marital/relationship status; number of years attended Free School; number of children; level of education achieved and GPAs earned, as well as whether special needs accommodations were ever provided; work history and current employment; current volunteer work done; and financial status)
2. a description of the path by which their families came to the decision to send them to AFS (as they understood it).
3. a rating on a scale of on a scale of “1” to “10,” with “10” being the highest/most important, on the following:
  - a. how important relationships are to them
  - b. whether the AFS had a positive influence on their college experiences
  - c. how satisfied they are with their current work
  - d. how important continual learning is in their lives
  - e. how they are positively able to understand and deal with the world that is (the “real world”)
  - f. how they are positively willing and able to create the “world that ought to be” (meaning working to change the world to meet their ideals)
  - g. how satisfied they are with their lives overall
4. information about the subjects’ experience at the Albany Free School, including:
  - a. do they think they made good choices during their time at the Albany Free School?
  - b. did they like the freedom that they had? Did they ever crave more structure?
  - c. at what age did they learn to read and what relationship do they have with reading now?
  - d. did they have any learning disabilities that were formally identified; and if so, how were they accommodated at the school?
  - e. did they have any vivid negative recollections about attendance at AFS?
5. information about whether they thought the Free School prepared them
  - a. for life after their attendance at the Free School (e.g. in high school, college, and paid employment, as well as in civic skills and desire to work to make the world/society different/better)
    - b. to take joy in learning as an adult
    - c. to enjoy life in general
  - b. how they would currently rank from least to most important the following: family, money, work, serving/helping others, relationships, and lifelong learning
7. their judgements on the Free School
  - a. whether they think the things that were emphasized at the AFS were the important things, the things that should have been stressed at a school
  - b. whether there was anything you would change about the AFS?
  - c. whether they would send their own children (those who exist now or those they may have in the future) to school similar to AFS?
8. Problems with the school – things they’d change

Tables

Table 1 – Participant Information

<b>Average age at time of interview and further breakdown</b>	27 (range was 19-37) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 participants ages 19-23</li> <li>• 7 participants ages 25-27</li> <li>• 5 participants ages 32-37</li> </ul>		
<b>Average number of years attended the Albany Free School</b>	7.7 (maximum possible is 11 years, age 3 – 8 <sup>th</sup> grade)		
		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Females	8	44%
	Males	9	50%
	Unknown (anonymous survey respondent)	1	5%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	17	94%
	unknown (anonymous survey respondent)	1	5%
<b>Have children at time of interview?</b>	3 children	2	11%
	2 children	2	11%
	1 child	1	5%
	No children	13	72%
<b>Marital status at the time of interview</b>	married	6	33%
	divorced or separated	2	11%
	never married	10	55%
<b>Financial independence at time of interview</b>	4-year degree-seeking, financially dependent on parents	3	17%
	financially independent (some with some debt, others with none)	15	83%

Table 2 – Formal Education Post- AFS

		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Did the alumni receive a high school diploma? If so, how?</b>	No diploma - Dropped out/homeschooled*	1	5%
	Graduated from public high school	8	44%
	Graduated from private high school	4	22%
	Got GED (either on own, with help from private high school, or with help from community college)	5	28%
<b>Highest education post Albany Free School at the time of interview</b>	attended a trade school (for photography)	1	5%
	attended some, or were in process of attending, community college	6	35%
	earned a Bachelor’s degree or were currently in a 4-year degree program	9	47%
	earned a Master’s degree	2	12%

\*The one individual who did not get a HS diploma did go on to graduate with a Bachelor’s from a 4-year college.

Table 3 – Grade-Point Average (GPA) Post High School

	<i>n</i>	<i>GPA (out of a maximum of 4.0)</i>
Graduates of 4-year degree programs GPA	9	3.4
Current students' higher education GPA	3	3.6
Attended unconventional program where GPAs were not calculated, or were not currently enrolled at any post-secondary institution	6	n/a

Table 4 – Alumni Work Status

<i>Current employment at time of interview</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Full-time student, no job	3	17%
Full-time parent, no outside job	1	5.5%
Between jobs (one had been honorably discharged from military and was training to re-enter military as Navy SEAL; one was getting ready to start new job in two weeks)	2	11%
Employed full time	12	66.7%

Table 5- Areas of Employment as Compared to National Averages

<b>Area of Employment</b>		<b>Percentage of AFS respondents in this field (out of 12, number employed)</b>	<b>Percentage of US workforce in this field (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020) (out of 147,795,000)</b>
Management, professional, and related occupations	education, training and library occupations	20.8 (2 full-time teachers, 1 part-time teacher)	6
	Community and social service occupations	16.7 (2 non-profit director/executive)	1.8
	Legal occupations	8.3 (paralegal)	1.2
	Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations	25 (leather crafter, movie director, part-time writer, part-time photographer)	2
Service occupations	Healthcare support occupations	8.3 (sleep technician)	3.2
	Food preparation and serving related occupations	12.5 (full time shift supervisor at a gas/convenience store, 1 part time bartender)	4.4
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	Farming, fishing, and forestry occupations	8.3 (farm work)	.7



*Table 6 -Satisfaction with Current Work*

<i>n</i>	Score on 1-10 scale
3	10
2	9
1	8.5
4	8
1	7.5
2	7
5	N/A (Respondent not currently employed)

**Corresponding Author Details**

Kristan A. Morrison is a Professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Radford University in Radford, VA, US. Contact Address: P.O. Box 6959, Radford, VA, US, 24142. Email: [kmorrison12@radford.edu](mailto:kmorrison12@radford.edu)



This work by Kristan A. Morrison is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)