

# True choice and taking ownership of life: a qualitative study into self-determination in Sudbury model schools

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to present the experiences with self-determination and taking ownership of life in Sudbury model schools that allow students true choice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – For this qualitative study we used a thematic analysis (TA) methodology. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 14 adult participants from eight different Sudbury model and comparable schools in the Netherlands, Israel and the US. These schools offered students real choice in the curriculum program. Transcripts were analyzed and corresponding meanings thematized. Self-determination theory (SDT) is used as a lens to interpret the findings.

**Findings** – The findings suggest that an organizational structure that supports own responsibility in an absence of an imposed program and a culture of no-interference creates conditions for taking ownership of life and choices (self-determination) and encompasses taking ownership of learning, education and one's future. Taking ownership of one's life seems to be related to strongly internally oriented processes with an internal locus of causality, to find their own motivation and taking responsibility for choices, behavior and consequences in a SDT need supportive social context.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study is part of a larger research that addressed multiple facets of their experiences with their schools to understand the longer-term effects these schools had on the adult lives of participants. This limits the scope of this paper to only explore the conditions that led to the mental state of "taking ownership of one's life."

**Originality/value** – Conditions that can lead to long-term self-determination of one's life and future in a school setting is an unexplored area of research.

**Keywords** Self-determination, Locus of causality, Ownership of life, Self-directed education, Sudbury model school, True choice

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

To recognize that "I am the one who chooses" and "I am the one who determines the value of an experience for me" is both an invigorating and a frightening realization. – Carl R. Rogers (1961, p. 122)

This article presents an exploration of findings that emerged from a larger research using thematic analysis (TA) with a reflexive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021) into experiences and effects on the adult lives of 14 participants who attended Sudbury model or similarly organized democratic schools (hereafter called Sudbury model schools). These type of schools offer a place for *Self-Directed Education* (SDE; Gray, 2023): education that derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner.

One element with long-term consequences that emerged from this analysis was taking one's life into one's own hands. Participants believed that they learned to accept that they are the protagonists of their lives. This perspective seems related to having an unusually

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Received 6 March 2024  
Revised 22 April 2024  
Accepted 22 May 2024

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The authors would like to thank the IONA Stichting, an international foundation for project funding located at Herengracht 276, 1016 BX Amsterdam, the Netherlands, for the partial funding of the PhD research.

broad spectrum of choices about how they spend their time, forcing them to ask themselves, “What do I value?” How would I most like to spend my time?” This led us to wonder what the relationship is between having a true choice environment, which even includes the choice to “do nothing,” in the school experience of K-12 (children aged 4–18) and the phenomenon of taking ownership of one’s life.

The findings presented here reveal central themes about how real life and democracy in these schools lead to taking responsibility daily and ultimately to taking ownership of life, which was sometimes experienced as overwhelming. These school environments contrast sharply with conventional school environments where “voice and choice” often means that teachers allow students to choose from a selected set of options or within a specified timeframe. In education, there is a continuum between a rigid structure in the strictest conventional schools, to a more flexible and student-oriented structure in progressive schools, to complete freedom of choice within a democratic structure of, among others, Sudbury model schools. How this type of freedom works out in the long term and the importance of feeling related to the community in these schools has never been properly investigated. The self-determination theory (SDT; [Ryan and Deci, 2017](#)), provides tools to gain an understanding of these environments from a motivational point of view. SDT studies people’s natural tendencies toward motivation and growth and the importance of environments supporting three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence and relatedness – as opposed to undermining them. Therefore, in this study we present the perspectives of the participants, and then investigate whether there may be connections between true choice, self-determination and taking ownership. Choice is a concept closely related to autonomy and self-determination (e.g. [Katz and Assor, 2007](#); [Reeve et al., 2003](#); [Ryan and Deci, 2017](#)), but seems to have received little scholarly attention in SDT recently.

First, this article explores the literature on choice within the theoretical framework of SDT, examining different aspects of choice and decision-making and the relationship with the three basic needs, autonomy, competence and relatedness. We then define what is meant by taking ownership of one’s life and differentiate ownership from internal *locus* of control and internal *locus* of causality. We explore what taking ownership means in relation to choice in conventional school settings. Next, we describe the range of choice inherent in Sudbury model schools. Then we present the participant comments and analyze the data to postulate a relationship between true choice and taking ownership in these schools. Finally, confluences with or divergences from SDT based on the unique, unexplored setting of these type of Sudbury model schools are explored.

## 2. Theory and previous research

### 2.1 *Self-determination theory and conditions for choice*

SDT is a metatheory that describes the effects at the psychological level of factors that influence human well-being by satisfying or undermining three fundamental needs, namely, autonomy, competence and relatedness. [Ryan and Deci \(2017\)](#) described choice as central to the concept of autonomy. [Deci and Ryan \(1985a\)](#) clarified what constitutes true choice, stating:

[ . . . ] a behavior is truly chosen only if the person could seriously consider not doing it. The inflexibility of a person having to do a behavior and not being able to seriously consider other options suggests that the behavior does not represent true choice, even if it was decided on. (p. 155)

Building upon this definition, [Reeve et al. \(2003\)](#) referred to the concept of an action choice, a choice that includes considering not to act. They conclude that “‘capacity to choose’ has much to do with an internally located and volitional sense of causality but little to do with the attributional experience of deciding between options” (p. 388). In other words, true choice is about the action or ability to make one’s own decisions based on an internal *locus* of causality and from voluntariness ([Deci and Ryan, 1985b](#); [Ryan and Connell, 1989](#)).

Environments characterized by the absence of external pressure, in which personal goals and choices are respected, are optimal for autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Ryan and Deci, 2000). A clear distinction is made between choice and decision-making (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Decision-making is about selecting between options, also called option choice (Reeve *et al.*, 2003). Often, studies that present themselves as choice-related study forms of decision-making or choosing between options. From these studies we know that having a choice is not in itself a motivation-enhancing factor unless choice has value for the person himself (Katz and Assor, 2007). Furthermore, choosing between too many options or making choices that do not match someone's competency level can lead to reduced motivation or stress. So, to meet the need for competence, choices should not be too complex, too easy or too difficult, but should still involve a challenge, i.e. within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1997).

Moreover, to be effective for motivation or internalization, choices, including those presented as options, must correspond to one's own interests, will, goals, preferences, ambitions and/or values (Deci and Ryan, 1991; Katz and Assor, 2007; Reeve *et al.*, 2003). In addition, conditions in which choices are made should meet circumstances involving good relationships with people significant to that person (Ryan and Deci, 2017). They highlighted the misconception that autonomy is more about independence than interdependence when it comes to decision-making. They showed that relatedness is as important as autonomy when making choices. They both play an important role in maintaining a sense of autonomy and agency. Also, when it comes to carrying out family or societal duties, relatedness is essential in allowing the sense of one's own will and choice for internalization. In short, it is not choice that determines the quality of motivation, but the degree to which the three basic needs are satisfied in relation to choices.

## ***2.2 How is taking ownership of one's life defined?***

The word "ownership" is frequently used in relation to material possessions, but taking ownership of one's life seems to be an undefined but commonly used concept. Although often used interchangeably, ownership and responsibility are not the same. Ownership is about possessing and controlling something, whereas responsibility is about fulfilling obligations and being accountable for one's actions. An internet search for "taking ownership of your life" yielded many returns that dealt with taking responsibility and control in work and life situations, in contrast with a tendency to blame outside forces for being stuck in unfavorable circumstances. These descriptions seem to be related to the concept of *locus* of control by Rotter (1966), which reflects the extent to which people feel they have control over a situation or behavior as opposed to feeling like a victim. Accepting responsibility instead of blaming other people or circumstances and being goal-oriented are aspects that define self-directedness (e.g. Kose, 2003; Toit-Brits, 2022). The *locus* of control concept only describes whether someone feels in control (motivated) in contrast to a state of amotivation or passivity, without considering the source and associated quality of the motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The question is whether taking ownership of one's life could not be better described from the continuum of motivation as defined by SDT because this theory incorporates the quality of motivation and the associated perceived *locus* of causality (PLOC; Ryan and Connell, 1989). Taking ownership of one's life assumes an internal PLOC which is about seeing oneself as the source of initiating and regulating behavior out of one's own will and approval (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

## ***2.3 How student choice and taking ownership is limited in conventional schools?***

Carl Rogers, a forefather of humanistic psychology, emphasized people's conscious understanding of themselves and the capacity to make choices on a path to self-actualization. Taking life into one's own hands is uncharted research territory in the context of schools. When ownership is referred to in a conventional school context, it is mostly

related to learning. Even where ownership of learning has been discussed in educational research, it does not appear to be clearly defined and is often used as a slogan or synonymous with participation, involvement or engagement (Wiley, 2009).

We wonder to what extent choice can truly be given in the context of conventional schools, because the student ultimately must meet all kinds of imposed curriculum requirements, such as tests, exams or final objectives. Yet, taking ownership in a conventional school context generally appears to be associated with creating opportunities to explore interests, set goals and pursue and sustain ambitions and goals (Conley and French, 2014). It includes participation “through discussions, choice, responsibility and decision-making” and it “emphasizes the students’ real actions of choice and control” (Enghag and Niedderer, 2008, p. 631). It promotes students’ sense of ownership of their education “by including students in school decision-making processes, by ensuring that students have the opportunity to express their opinions about the way schools are run, and by creating school communities that are symbiotic” (Scott, 2010, p. 36). More recently, Toit-Brits (2022) theorized how ownership of learning is enhanced by nurturing a sense of belonging, in addition to creating opportunities for personalized learning and participation, and supporting a sense of accountability and self-discipline through the promotion of self-advocacy skills. From these descriptions we postulate that taking ownership of learning or education can be nourished by belongingness and participation in one’s own environment and by creating opportunities for following one’s own interests and setting one’s own goals, and that it involves true choice by the students. Thus, the extent to which a student can influence his/her education and set goals appears to be an important factor. However, we also postulate that choice and influence in decision-making will not transcend the goal of completing tasks or assignments and obtaining degrees within a predetermined curriculum.

Many of the SDT-related studies regarding decisions or choices are conducted in schools under these conditions and focus on the short term, on option choices and their direct effect on motivation for tasks or assignments. Achieving goals laid down in the curriculum is usually mandatory and controlled by means of rewards or punishments, conditions that potentially undermine the natural tendencies toward motivation and growth (Ryan and Deci, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2017) emphasized that schools should be more than learning factories, schools should “shape the development of the whole child, affecting intellectual outcomes as well as motivation, self-concept, and the validity and integrity of self-development” (p. 353). They underscore the long-term objective of SDT that “capabilities for engagement and self-regulation will likely be more serviceable in subsequent life than any particular facts learned in the schools” (p. 353). We assume that taking ownership of one’s life encompasses choices that have to do with longer-term objectives, with giving direction to one’s life and accepting circumstances that are instrumental in achieving that goal (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Long-term effects of true choice, as defined by SDT, regarding education are difficult to investigate under conventional conditions that do not provide true choice. Because this study focused on a school environment without the imposed curriculum requirements, we can investigate more deeply how true choice circumstances may lead to self-determination of students and the effects that this may hold.

#### *2.4 Choice as part of the daily practice in Sudbury model schools*

Long before Ryan and Deci advocated the importance of autonomy and warned about the undermining effects of rewards and punishments on the healthy psychological development of students, there were educational reformers such as Fröbel, Ferrer and Dewey, who came to similar conclusions and designed forms of education in which the autonomy of the student was more central. Pedagogues such as Ferrer, Tolstoy, A.S. Neill and Greenberg were founders of what are now called democratic schools (Swartz, 2016). Although SDT seems to offer every reason to study these types of schools, they have rarely been the subject of attention in educational studies.

The most radical democratic school model that allows children the freedom to play and explore freely and use their inherent tendencies to learn is the Sudbury model, which rejects a predetermined curriculum and imposed lessons (Ellis, 2013). The Sudbury model refers to the Sudbury Valley School, a day school for children aged 4–18 (K-12) in Massachusetts, USA, that has existed since 1968. Sudbury model schools aim to place responsibility on the student to determine his or her learning path and future, including whether to obtain diplomas. Learning happens through self-motivation and self-regulation and through evaluation by self-criticism (Rosenberg, 1973) driven by a free interaction with people of all ages (Gray and Feldman, 1999, 2004). The foundational assumptions of this model closely align with SDT-defined human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ackoff and Greenberg, 2008), underpinning a philosophical framework and foundation that enables children to experience a high level of autonomy through free association with people of all ages and unfettered educational/developmental freedom (Greenberg, 2016). Daily, these students decide for themselves how to spend their time and with whom, even to the point that they can choose to do nothing at all. The philosophy is that boredom is sometimes necessary to delve into one's own motivation to find a purpose, instead of being distracted by programs offered.

Treating children as fully equal to adults is perhaps the most controversial starting point from which this school is built, as Greenberg (2016) wrote: “They are fully equal: not partially equal, not almost equal, not gradually more and more equal as they grow older” (p. 53). Typically, a Sudbury model school is characterized by the absence of authoritarian hierarchical structures, including subtle inequalities that manipulate or entice students into adult-preferred (learning) activities (Greenberg, 2016; Traxler, 2015). Adults in these environments are role models of effective behavior, knowledge and interaction and thus provide a source of learning (Ackoff and Greenberg, 2008; Rietmulder, 2019). If students want to take lessons, they can choose to organize that. There are not many schools that allow children and adolescents this level of choice and control over their life.

### ***2.5 How are Sudbury model schools organized?***

A consequence of the foundational principles as described in the previous section is that “the school is organized as a participatory democracy in which adults and students of all ages have equal rights, responsibilities and freedoms” (Feldman, 2001, p. 4). Feldman argues that the democratic community sets the boundaries (rules) to protect the school and to prevent people from interfering with each other's activities (norms for living together and to protect individual freedom). Students have an equal say in all decision-making bodies as adults do over all aspects of the organization of the school. In addition to control over the budget and school rules, students can also use their voice in performance reviews and in annual elections to determine whether employees can stay on next year (Feldman, 2001; Greenberg, 2016).

Globally, there are about 50 schools that share common characteristics, whether or not they explicitly identify themselves as a “Sudbury school” (Gray *et al.*, 2021). Common organizational structures include a school meeting and a judicial committee in which students have equal voice. In addition, these schools describe other committees and school meeting-appointed positions with executive responsibilities to deal with the daily business of running the institution. To carry out shared interests or activities such as excursions, woodworking, cooking or making music that require management of space, money or resources, there are subassociations that are managed as independent bodies, sometimes by students unaided. For a more elaborate description of the context see Ackoff and Greenberg (2008), Feldman (2001), Gray *et al.* (2021) and Gray and Chanoff (1986).

### 3. Methodology of the present study

The here presented study is exploring findings that relate to taking ownership of life and forms part of a larger qualitative research using TA with a reflexive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021). The methods of data selection and analysis presented below mainly describe those of the entire study and how the sample presented here was selected.

#### 3.1 Data collection procedure

We sought graduates from multiple Sudbury model or comparably organized schools from various countries, thereby minimizing individual school effects and effects of specific country-related culture on the findings. From a total of 55 schools in 13 countries, 15 schools had operated long enough to provide a possible population of alumni that could meet the requirements for this research and were contacted. From this group, eight schools in three countries (USA, Israel and the Netherlands) finally participated in this study.

The candidate selection process was delegated to a school contact person. Our requirement was that participants had attended the school for at least five years and had also gained at least five years of experience in adult life. We accepted two deviations from this requirement. To minimize potential selection bias, each school was asked to select two dissimilar types of individuals for the study: people of different genders, backgrounds, experiences in school and with different educational and career paths after school. Fourteen participants took part in the interviews. From the eight schools, six schools in all three countries provided two participants and an additional two schools in the USA provided one participant.

As part of the procedure approved by the ethical commission of the Open university, signed consent forms were collected of all participants before the interview. Semi-structured interviews based on a preprepared interview guide in Dutch and English (Kvale, 2007) were conducted online using video conferencing software (Microsoft Teams) and audio recordings were archived. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90min. Several open questions prompted the participants to recall certain memories about aspects of their schools and the perceived effects on their lives. Transcripts were anonymized and noted down using an intelligent *verbatim* method (Bailey, 2008), focusing on the essence of what was said with annotations where relevant emotions or interruptions were involved. Capital letters were used when a word was pronounced with more emphasis. Transcripts were sent to the participant for member checking as part of data validation (Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

#### 3.2 Who are the participants?

Out of the 14 participants, 5 persons identified themselves with masculine gender (he/him/his) and 9 with feminine gender (she/her/hers); other pronouns were not chosen. The age range of the participants was diverse; the oldest participants were 35–40 years old and the youngest were between 20 and 24 years old. Consequently, the number of years that passed since they left their school also differed, from longer than ten years to around five years, except for Beth, who left the school more than one year before the interview (the names used for the participants are pseudonyms). Three of them attended the school during their whole childhood and two others almost from the beginning, from the age of six and seven. Three came to the school at the age of 10, one at the age of 11, three at the age of 12 and one at the age of 13. Stephen was an exception, having started at age 16 and only experiencing the school for two years. The participants from the eight schools confirmed by the way they talked about the organizational structure that they had experienced very comparable contexts.

### ***3.3 Data analysis procedure and the selection of the in this study presented set of findings***

The main objective of the larger research, of which this study is a derivative, concerned corresponding experiences of aspects related to school experiences and effects on the adult lives of 14 graduates from eight Sudbury model schools in three countries. In analyzing the interviews, we used TA with a reflexive approach, in which we mainly looked for corresponding meanings in answers and did not limit ourselves to answers to specific questions. We were aware of how our own knowledge and background, namely, being familiar with this type of education, on the one hand is important for generating themes, but on the other hand posed a risk of coding too selectively. We have been reflective by always asking ourselves the question, “what exactly do the participants say and to what extent can the meaning between different quotes be compared?”

The analysis was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, we focused on coding similar meanings in the transcripts using Atlas.ti analysis software. In the meantime, more interviews were conducted and transcribed, making coding and comparing meanings an iterative process until no new codes surfaced after 11 cases. Atlas.ti gave the opportunity to combine codes and analyze groups of quotes in code combinations which helped build themes. In the second phase, these groups of quotes around a similar theme were then brought together in a word document. They were again critically examined, and sometimes moved under a more appropriate theme. In this phase, quotes from the Dutch participants were translated into English close to the original meaning and expressions. Translation remains a subjective step in qualitative research because translation itself is an interpretation of the translator (Temple and Young, 2004), but it is necessary to present findings. Quotes were reduced to the essence of the meaning it contained and digressions and overly personal and/or case-specific parts were excluded. Themes that revealed an interrelationship were selected for further interpretation. One such group of themes that appear to be related to taking ownership of life have been selected to present here in this study.

## **4. Findings**

This section presents the four themes with an interrelationship to taking ownership of your life. These themes are how the school was aiming at mimicking adult life and taking responsibility, how the structure of the schools facilitated equal rights and responsibilities for all its members, how the culture of noninterference (respect for personal choices) supported an agentive, inquisitive attitude and how this structure and culture ultimately led to taking ownership of your life. We will elaborate below on those themes and use quotations to reveal how we landed on these themes.

### ***4.1 “This school (is) as an experience of life beginning already”***

When participants talked about what the school had meant for them, four participants spoke generally about how the school’s philosophy aimed at providing a place that mimics adult life (*building life experience*). Helen, Ella and Leo referred to the fact that the school offered a place where they could practice aspects of adult life. Leo explained, “it’s a demo-life. You live life in the community and then you go out READY, knowing how to live it.” Ella referred to the school as “real life” and said, “this school (is) as an experience of life beginning already.” Helen explained the school as, “It is actually a small society in itself.” In relation to this, Helen highlighted the aspect of own responsibility as a purpose of the school to take initiative and prepare oneself to enter society as an adult. She said, “It is really focused on your own responsibility to be able to do what is interesting for you so that you can prepare to enter society as an adult.” In fact, Lillian explained the absence of an imposed program as, “I also think that [this model] sometimes more than being a school, is the absence of a

school." Lillian refers to how the experiences she had and the interactions she had with the people at the school affected her, "just that life, that is what really was the influence." This demo life at school meant for Leo that he could try out different things and explore his strengths and weaknesses; "it gave me that experience of trying to be in all kinds of stuff, building myself, failing, succeeding, realizing what I'm good at and less good."

The participants emphasized that school in a general sense was a place to practice adult life and gain life experience. In some excerpts, they make a connection to the school as a place to explore and take initiative, to develop personal skills by trial and error and become aware of one's competencies to prepare for adult life. Also, some referred to gaining experience by living life in a community or small society, emphasizing a social dimension of learning about adult life. From these answers we can postulate that in essence the school is aimed at taking control of life and development in a social context that functions as a breeding ground for real life.

#### ***4.2 "The democratic structure was a means of figuring out how to coexist with people"***

In answers about their experiences with the structure of their schools, six participants described the organizational structure in terms of clear and predictable (*clear structure*) and facilitating equal rights and responsibilities for all its members, students and adults (*equal status in the community*).

Claire, Helen, Stephen and Lillian signified that the structure was clear and transparent: a predictable environment. Claire said, "The structure and organization of the school is actually very clear." A clear and transparent structure is also what Helen and Stephen refer to when they explain that there was a rule book with all the rules and how, in Helen's words, "It was just clear to everyone what the rules were, [...] no matter how old you were, everyone had to abide by the same rules and have the same rights." Lillian said that meetings were structured places to talk about things that were going on in the school. They all seemed to refer to a similar phenomenon of a well-defined, transparent and predictable structure in the organization of the schools that facilitated an equal status between all people in their schools.

The school was referred to as a "democratic school" or "a democracy" by Stephen, Jessica, Lillian, Helen and Andrew. By their descriptions, the democratic principle of what Lillian called "one man one vote" is comparable to a participatory or direct democracy. Jessica clarified the equal status of all people in the school, "everyone from the youngest student all the way up to the staff members have one vote and they use that vote to determine how the school is run." Andrew highlighted that an equal vote does not automatically mean an equal voice in the school. He referred to the fact that "people have an opportunity to have an equal voice. [...] Some people are much more charismatic and able to get their point across than others, and that is something that people grow into a bit." He explained that equal status does not mean equal degree of influence and that people can learn from each other. Lillian explained how the democratic self-governing structure of the school was a means of aligning a group of people and is not an end. She said, "The democratic structure, more than imposing an order or imposing some philosophy or structure, was more a means of figuring out how to coexist with people."

From these findings, we assume that opportunities to participate in one's own environment increases the sense of ownership and personal responsibility for the values and norms of the school community that are important for building a culture of respect for others. The descriptions suggest that the clear, transparent and democratic structure was a tool to figure out how to live together with the diversity of people in the school and supported equal status in the community. As [Feldman \(2001\)](#) stressed, clarity about community norms (a

clear structure) and being equally responsible for the welfare of the community (equal status) are means to learn how to live together.

### 4.3 “If I wanted to do something, I had to do it”

Six participants spoke of a *culture of no interference* with their activities when referring to the general atmosphere. This culture can also be described as one of respect for personal choices. In their view, this culture was important for *taking initiative* and promoting their *curiosity*.

Suzanne, Ted, Philip and Jessica referred to the culture in terms of no interference with choices. Ted explained how the freedom to choose what to do and not have anyone interfere with it was part of the culture:

Everybody is free to do what they want on an individual basis. Nobody is going to tell you what to do. That was a pretty integral part of the culture, and that definitely had a big influence on me. Because it was all to me if I wanted to do something, I had to do it. If somebody else wanted to do something, they had to do it.

Suzanne makes a connection with this freedom to choose and being responsible as follows, “One of the greatest aspects is freedom, the freedom to choose. The freedom to be responsible, too.” Suzanne explained how the freedom to choose what you do is almost naturally linked to taking responsibility. She describes how the choice of activities entailed a responsibility to, for example, tidy up, be on time or other responsibilities that were consequences of the choice. Like Ted and Suzanne, also Helen, Marcia and Jessica stated that the effect of this kind of freedom was that they had to take an active role, alone or with others, in creating their daily pastimes. According to Jessica, the organization offered a lot of opportunities that one could choose to be active in as well, like in committees and corporations. Jessica explained further how the freedom to choose was connected to the freedom to quit and divert into another direction based on her own curiosity. She said:

If I decided I didn’t want to do that anymore, I had the space to be able to decide that for myself and take a different path based on what I was interested in, what I wanted to learn at the time.

Helen and Marcia pointed to the aspect of increased curiosity as an effect of this freedom. Marcia, who was a good and compliant student in her previous school, said: “It gave me (a message) back not only to do what people expect me to do. Really to do what I wanted to do. It gave me back (my) curiosity.” Also, Helen reflected on how she was doing well in her previous school and always did what she was told. Once she started at a Sudbury model school, she remembered that because no one told her what to do, “You have to think for yourself, ‘What do I want to do now?’” She also noticed that the other students were more inquisitive and asked “‘why’ questions,” which encouraged her to ask questions and look for answers herself. These two participants together with Jessica made a connection between curiosity and learning. As Marcia elaborated, now that she is an adult, her curiosity made that when she must learn something new, she enjoys it to the fullest.

The culture of no interference with personal motivations or choices is about respect for each other’s autonomy. It seemed to evoke an active attitude toward self-determination by means of taking initiative and undertaking activities and promoting curiosity and self-direction. The curious, agentive attitude seems to function as a prerequisite for personal development and learning. In this sense, the culture of no interference appears to support competence. The culture of no interference in their daily activities at school ensured that they learned to focus strongly on their own motivation and felt the responsibility to make their own choices and accept the consequences. This experience on a daily basis could we describe as part of the school curriculum, about which [Greenberg et al. \(2005\)](#) wrote that students are expected to be responsible for their lives and their communities from the moment they enter school.

#### 4.4 “It sent me the message that ultimately, I am the owner of my life”

Regarding whether there were things hard or challenging about the structure, six of the participants spoke about the challenge of having to hold responsibility and accountability for your own life and education and the process of building a sense of ownership of their life (*taking ownership*). They here mention the structure as a *tool* to learn not to place responsibility outside of themselves (*beyond own control*) and develop a sense of ownership. Under conventional educational circumstances, with the structure of a school it is commonly meant the program and time schedule, also called a structured day. In the context of these schools, participants speak about an underlying structure, a clear organizational structure that supports the equal status between people in the school. This difference is best expressed in an answer by Jessica who explained:

The most challenging thing is that there is underlying structure that we talked about earlier, but there's not a structured day. As a student, you get to decide what your day is. If you're a little kid, that's usually pretty easy. Kids just do whatever they want anyway, but as you get older and start to get bored with all the stuff you did as a kid, it's up to you to decide what direction you want to take, where you want to go today, what you want to do today, what you want to learn, what you want to focus on. Sometimes that's very overwhelming, because there are a lot of options and you're never told what to do.

Jessica mentioned that structuring her own day was not always easy and sometimes was overwhelming, especially when she grew older. Also, other participants talked in more detail about the challenge of having to deal with structuring their daily life at school.

Claire explained that the process of taking ownership for the structure of the school was difficult; “The hard part is that you have to find out that you are responsible for it yourself.” According to her, the “well-defined and clear” structure, referring to the rules that are the same for everyone (*equal status*), is a *tool* for learning to focus on one's own responsibility. She went on to say that putting control outside of oneself makes it difficult; “you can have a lot of resistance to it, but if you like to place it outside of yourself [...] (you're) making it SUPER hard for yourself.” Lilian explained that the organizational structure of the school can sometimes be difficult in “natural ways” as a *tool*. She highlighted how one could blame external forces for “feeling stuck and bored,” but how ultimately the structure supported a process to understand that it was her own choice and that no restrictions were placed on her. She concludes, “That could be very challenging to feel the weight of your own life at a young age, but ultimately definitely beneficial.”

Having to structure her days, Ella said, “it might sound easier in some ways, but I think it is much harder.” She continued, “I would also see this with my friends that went to other schools that it is very convenient to have somebody else to blame” and explains how being responsible for all aspects of life and there is no one else to blame is hard for a kid. She points out that the school environment offers that challenge and at the same time the safety to learn to deal with it:

When you're genuinely responsible for decisions in your life and for the way your day-to-day looks, and for the way your relationships look, there's always so much blaming you can do and that is HEAVY. That can be really, really difficult for kids to handle. Again, it's an environment where you can be challenged in that way and feel protected still and not fall apart. So, I think that's an amazing thing about it, but it was VERY challenging.

She continued by giving an example of her experience preparing for exams she chose to do and explains how difficult it was to deal with taking ownership. She referred to the fact that no one took her by the hand and that she had to do it herself: “Nobody gave me a schedule. Nobody was going to say this year we do these subjects, and this is when you start studying, just nothing. You have to do all of it.” It was up to her how she would succeed; it was not beyond her control. Leo said, “I want to say everything is challenging. The question (is) how you go to this challenge.” The process behind structuring his days

was expressed by him as “It’s not served on a platter to you. You need to work for it. So, it makes it hard.”

Rachel echoed building ownership of life as hard, saying that she at times would have liked to have some direct guidance or instruction by adults. She said, “I think at times I sort of craved having an adult tell me what I needed to be doing and learning.” The heaviness of having to deal with overseeing her decisions all the time made her sometimes wish for a break while she was in school. When asked what these experiences meant for her, Rachel continued by saying, “I certainly think it sent me the message that ultimately, I am the owner of my life.” Here, she pointed out that the experience of being responsible to structure her day was hard though important to the process of focusing on herself as an actor in taking ownership for decisions about her life, saying “Ultimately, I truly felt that it was my job to decide and to decide well.” She further explained how this structure contrasted environments in which children are told that they can make their own decisions but in the meantime adults verbally or nonverbally steer the children’s decisions in a direction the adults deem desirable.

From what the participants experienced, achieving a state of taking ownership was a challenging process. They also talked about how the structure supported this process, not actively, but as an instrument to achieve this state. By the structure in this section, they emphasize especially the fact that there was no structured day, but an underlying structure that supported the inward directed process of understanding their own responsibility in directing their life. It is the organizational structure of the school that facilitates the equal status of individuals necessary for a culture without interference of personal choices.

## 5. Discussion

The group of themes presented in this study focused on long-term consequences on taking ownership of life and forms part of a larger research into experiences of graduates with Sudbury model schools. The presented findings give us an insight into the role of the structure on self-determination, the support of the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as SDT conditions that lead to taking ownership of life in these schools.

### 5.1 *The role of structure in these schools*

The findings show that overarchingly, the schools are structured in such a way that they allow young people responsibility to practice and prepare for adult life. This goal, preparing for life as an adult, was achieved at these schools by giving students a far-reaching autonomy in decisions both about their lives and within their communities. Structure is an aspect that is in support of self-determination, in contrast to control (Ryan and Deci, 2020). These authors argue that controlling conditions negatively influence motivation, but that these conditions should not be confused with structure. They explain that structure, as is usually provided in schools, provides frameworks within which one can experience competency satisfaction. When participants in this study talked about structure, they mainly referred to a clear, predictable structure that provided equal status between the people, both students and adults, and a democratic structure to organize coexistence with the variety of people in the school. This structure sets boundaries that determine personal autonomy as well as the relationship with one’s own (social) environment. Some participants reported that the structure was experienced as a tool that effectively made them realize that they could not pass on the responsibility to external forces. By expressing not being able to place responsibility beyond themselves, they emphasized the intrinsically oriented nature of how they perceived taking ownership. Essentially, it shows how they experienced the causality of their motivations coming from within themselves, pointing to an internal perceived *locus* of causality (e.g. Deci and Ryan, 1985b; Ryan and Connell, 1989).

## 5.2 Support for the need of autonomy and competence

The findings show that choice in these schools also means that someone can choose to stop doing something or choose something else, which determines the degree of agency these students have. This type of freedom to choose is described by [Deci and Ryan \(1985a\)](#) as “true choice,” which is an important condition for self-determination. The findings showed that the opportunity to freely choose how to spend their time generated an active and inquisitive attitude and facilitated conditions for competence development. It is this phenomenon that these schools refer to as freedom: the fact that one can determine the use of one’s time (self-determination) and accept the consequences of choices (personal responsibility). In this context, Ella spoke about how preparing for exams was hard. Taking the exams was not a goal that was imposed on her as an obligation; she was able to choose to do so out of her own will. For autonomous motivation and self-determination, volitional conditions are important ([Deci and Ryan, 2000](#); [Ryan and Deci, 2000, 2020](#)).

The culture of respect for personal choices (*no interference*) in an age-mixed community forms the social context that supports autonomy, competence and relatedness through free interaction. [Gray and Feldman \(2004\)](#) revealed how the age-mixed environment is competency supportive, as individuals can communicate freely and find peers, not necessarily of the same age, to learn from through Vygotsky-style scaffolding and mutual teaching.

## 5.3 Support for the need of relatedness

Taking a long-term retrospective stance, these findings show that participants found the process of taking ownership of their lives in school challenging or difficult. It suggests that feelings of well-being may have fluctuated during their time at this school, as participants referred to this process as difficult or hard. The study by [Reis et al. \(2000\)](#) demonstrates that feelings of well-being are not expected to be constant, but relatedness plays an important supportive role. Similarly, [Toit-Brits \(2022\)](#) referred to the importance of a sense of belonging to a sense of ownership for learning in conventional schools. [Reis et al. \(2000\)](#) suggested that participation in enjoyable social activities leads to greater feelings of well-being than just feelings of closeness and connection with others. They reported that feelings of being understood and accepted and being able to talk about matters that are meaningful with others, as well as being able to interact freely with others and do fun things together, was important in feeling a connection with others. These conditions that support relatedness seem to correspond to the environment that Sudbury model schools offer: the free interaction between people of all ages, the free choice to undertake joint activities, the extent to which they have a say and can speak about things that are important for them and in which they learn to take others into account. It seems to correspond with the finding that because the process of taking ownership took place in a context that the participant felt connected to, they felt protected.

## 5.4 Conditions for taking ownership of life

While the participants talked about a culture of no interference in defining daily pastimes, when referencing taking ownership of one’s life they referred to support from the underlying school structure. Both themes appear to be linked, although the former theme describes more short-term effects in the school as provoking an agentive and curious attitude that appears to function as a prerequisite for personal development (competency support). The theme of ownership emphasizes a deeper and longer-lasting psychological effect of the awareness of one’s own responsibility in life-defining choices. Reference was made to the sometimes-overwhelming nature of this type of decision-making, but none spoke about negative side-effects of this experience.

The findings suggest that the fundamental principles of self-responsibility in an absence of an imposed program and the culture of no-interference creates conditions for taking ownership of life and choices (self-determination), which encompasses taking ownership of learning, education and one's future. From this research, we theorize that the far-reaching autonomy that these participants experienced at a young age during their school years, having real choice over their daily activities within the structure of these schools, has led to the understanding that they are the protagonists of their lives. In their answers, taking ownership of life seems to be related to strongly internally oriented processes of finding their own motivation and taking responsibility for choices, behavior and consequences. [Deci and Ryan \(2000\)](#) have extensively described the importance of finding one's own motivation in pursuing goals. If we consider that young people are often sensitive to the expectations of others or the outside world, not interfering with choices could serve as a pedagogical means to get to their own core, to get to know themselves first and foremost and secondly, to make mindful self-defined choices. We must note that these choices are never free from outside influences; we reject the idea that choices are made in pure isolation. The only thing these participants made clear is that they see themselves as the source for making well-considered choices. Young people of school age are usually faced with a lot of external guidance, no matter how well-intentioned it is. Under these circumstances it can be very difficult to learn to distinguish between behavior based on one's own motivation or behavior that results from docility or a will-to-please. What the context of these Sudbury model schools create is an environment in which young people, by being confronted every day with true choices at their own level of competence, grow toward a more "mature" state of being and an awareness of their own responsibility in shaping their lives, with everything that entails.

### **5.5 Limitations and suggestions for further research**

The scope of what could be presented here is limited to findings related to "taking ownership of life." How this ownership of life has affected them in their adult lives is room for another investigation, as well as its connection with other factors such as the role of the community, the role of staff, the personal characteristics of the participants and their home situation on the satisfaction of basic needs. More research into these other factors and how they interrelate will be necessary to understand the effects of these types of schools, which is the scope for the entire research. In addition, qualitative research naturally focuses on understanding the experiences of a small group of people under certain circumstances. More research, including quantitative research, is needed to explore the scope of these experiences, including beyond these types of schools. We believe that the far-reaching autonomy combined with personal responsibility at the age of primary school to 18 years deserves more attention from the scientific field to better understand human development under noncompulsory conditions, especially by studies based on SDT, which potentially can influence educational choices in the future. In other words, Sudbury model and other democratic schools, although until now seldomly scientifically studied, could make an unexpectedly strong contribution to the understanding of conditions for the satisfaction of basic needs for school-aged children and adolescents that is central to SDT, one of the most important motivational theories in education.

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