



Sands School - June 2016

Headteacher

No one. Everybody. Sands is a democratic school, a co-op, so there's no hierarchy. All decisions are taken collectively by teachers and students at the weekly, student-chaired school meeting, one person, one vote. This applies both to day-to-day decision making and strategic planning, which you'd expect to be the job of governors but at Sands the governors don't govern in the usual sense, they don't even get to vote. Nor do parents, by the way.

So Sands has a rationale. But it is not in thrall to a Big Idea. There's no guru calling the shots here -- no Neill, no Steiner, no Hahn, though they do own up to a dash of Tagore. The point is, Sands is not the keeper of anyone's flame and this frees it up to respond to the here and now and reinvent itself as it sees fit. It makes it up as it goes along? Yes, that's exactly what it does, it's in a state of continuous evolution under the influence of the democratic process. And if that makes Sands sound like some sort of countercultural cloud cuckoo land blithely defying societal norms, inspired by a school motto of "If it feels good, do it", sorry, it's all much more down to earth than that. When you visit, Sands feels at first little like a school what with students sprawled on the grass chatting when surely they should be in class, dammit. Go deeper and you discover both the strong seriousness that drives the school and a reassuring mundanity in, for example, the way it pairs rights with responsibilities: "Everyone in the school has the right to eat school lunches, but if you choose to do so, you then have the responsibility to do your fair share of washing up". This essential pragmatism is testament to the school's trust in the common sense and goodwill of its teachers and students and expresses itself in the down-to-earth simplicity of its core value: "We believe that everyone should be treated equally, be happy, and have access to a good education."

Mark Twain said: 'If voting made any difference they wouldn't let us do it', a sentiment with which students in some democratic schools would agree. The perils of kidology are obvious here. Teachers, by virtue of an accumulation of life experience and the accretion of wisdom, could use the force-field this creates to dominate debate in school meetings -- even to spin off into something cultish. They acknowledge the perils of dominant personality syndrome: 'We carry great authority as the owners of the knowledge and skills that children want to access. With the best will in the world, this does create huge inequalities between the possessors of learning, the teachers, and the consumers, the students.' They guard against undue influence, in our observation, by exercising respectful self-restraint. The best

decisions, they say, are made when everyone decides together -- an empirical appraisal. In the school meeting we attended you could see the adults swap glances at one point as a motion approached a vote. They seemed to be sharing something like 'We'll possibly need to come back to this and debate it some more -- that's okay.' Because of this, students engage full-bloodedly and amazingly articulately in debate, justly confident that their voices count equally. They do. And they do get to decide everything -- from humdrum practicalities and discipline issues to admissions and staff appointments. One parent told us, laughing, 'all this democracy isn't always welcome at home -- they're forever questioning things'.

When, say, Ofsted comes calling, Sands' public-facing spokesperson is Sean Bellamy, one of the school's founders. He rejoices in the title of Administrator. He didn't put himself forward when we visited, a student took charge of us; we only got to speak to him by hunting him down at lunch.

In addition to the customary legal duties of charity trustees, the responsibility of the governors is to defend the school against corruption of its foundational values -- eg, by dominant personalities or entryism. Both they and parents can lobby the school meeting and have their views debated, but the autonomy of the student-teacher body is everything, hence the school's arm's-length position on parental interference. Budget setting remains with the governors.

Academic Matters

Some seriously bright and thinkerly teachers here inspire a reverence for learning, no question. Sands teaches up to GCSE, 'flawed' as it is. Students sit exams when they're ready; the school is more interested in promoting self-discovery and personal development as essential factors in awakening innate talent and promoting self-directed learning. No teaching to the test, no fact-cramming, no coercion, no competition. Osbert Sitwell once said 'My education takes place during the holidays from Eton'. Chances are he could have fitted it into term times at Sands. There's hardheadedness to this approach. Sands believes that the emphasis in mainstream schools on factual recall and the application of ordered methodologies prepares children for the very jobs that computers will soon do better. The future, they reckon, lies with soft skills: creativity, collaboration, communication and lateral thinking.

Classes - ave 12 - comprise a mix of ages. The school acknowledges that 'kids increasingly feel like they have to do exams more than they ever did'. Some students go for it bigtime, bag all the GCSEs they can and go on to soar; others go for no more than they need for whatever's next, regarding GCSEs as negotiable currency -- necessary 'bits of paper' -- 'You do what you need do'. One arty student had settled for just four, three for art school and one for fun and felt 'in no need whatever of any more' -- her time was better spent painting. She's not typical. No one's typical. Unsurprisingly the school isn't remotely interested in looking good in league tables and the record shows that it doesn't. Don't read that as blasé, they take aspiration seriously. Ofsted, never knowingly effusive, said in 2013: 'Pupils' achievements are good, as a result of good teaching, an effective curriculum and the excellent learning environment.' Market forces determine what makes a good teacher: students empty-classroom those they reckon aren't up to it. All staff - 50:50 m and f - are appraised by students, who are also integral to the selection process. All are qualified, most

have worked at mainstream schools. No shortage of recruits: the recently advertised post of art teacher lured more than 100 applicants.

Going off-topic in classes in pursuit of fruitful and fascinating digressions is normal. One student said 'I still remember the arguments I had with Nathan, my maths teacher, about philosophy and climbing'. If you want to pursue an interest in astrophysics or circus skills, they'll fix it for you. If it snows, they drop everything and go up to the moors. If you're in the middle of a great painting, you can go at it three days straight. The last week of the summer term is devoted to camping beside the sea.

If a mainstream school is a place of decrees and proclamations, Sands is a school of delicate balances, sensitive negotiations and unrelenting tensions. Sure, you don't have to go to lessons if you don't want to... but we only offer places to students who want to learn. If you opt to attend, make sure you get to class on time or you'll face a sanction. You don't have to do subjects you dislike... but we'd like you to give them a second chance. There's a criticism made of schools like Sands that freedom to bunk off when you feel like it can be lethargy inducing, and they work hard to demonstrate the link between hard work and joy in achievement. Most students do go through a phase (or two) of skyiving and larking in a spirit of, say, Hey, party! or adolescent angst. One mother described her initial feelings of 'Oh my God, what have I done?' but had learnt that all's well that ends well. You won't be surprised to learn that this is no place to stand and watch students, like heroes of Soviet labour, march in shining-eyed cohorts past developmental milestones bang on time. They breeze on by when they're good and ready.

Special needs are addressed by all teachers and three specialists. Everyone chooses their academic tutor, with whom they devise their timetable. Tutors liaise with parents and also have a pastoral role, acting as advocate of last resort for any tutee in especially hot water. There is no staff room at Sands, no uniform, no us, no them and no bells, obviously. Imagine.

Games, Options, the Arts

You've sussed there's not a lot of snarling, tribal rugby going on here, what with the lack of numbers and the absence of playing fields, not to mention a general disinclination. Not that they're against competitive team sports. Students who want to play at a decent level join local clubs. The school promotes, on a broad front, in line with demand, anything that's hilarious and physically active, including tree climbing, swimming in the river, hockey, football, weight training, Kung Fu, skateboarding, surfing and cycling. Music making tends to be similarly ad hoc but of a higher order of accomplishment - instrumental specialists brought in according to need. Concerts happen as and when. The Performing Arts BTEC serves as a focus for musicians as also for dance, drama and art students. The tenor of Sands is markedly arty - 'we're known for our art'. And crafty. Woodwork thrives under the auspices of the well-loved Peach. The art room is heaven on earth.

Background and Atmosphere

Arose from the ashes of Dartington Hall in 1987, but not as a reinvention. The radical difference is that Sands was co-designed by students and teachers, it's not the

offspring of a single seer, and it's fuelled by dreams and intuitions, not certainties, in a spirit of 'We'll know what we think when we see what we do'. Call it creatively muddling through if you like - creativity implies ferment. The school's name derives from the salutation used by David Gribble, a founder, in letters to the other two founders, Sean Bellamy and Sybilla Higgs - 'Dear S and S'. Geddit? The school has evolved under continuous and, it has to be said, unsparing self-examination - what you see is where we are. It reckons it's in better shape now than ever, but it's still light years away from complacency - 'Oh no, we're not perfect'. Admin is, though. Bursar Peta runs a tight ship.

The school occupies an early Victorian townhouse with a nice garden in the middle of Ashburton. Expect no hush (so fashionable just now) for hush there is none, not ever, there being masses going on in all directions. This an infectiously friendly, happy place where everyone meets your eye - they are the only young persons we have ever met who don't talk up to you or down to you but treat you exactly as if you were one of them. Scuffed but comfy - the building, that is. Lived in. Fit for purpose. Zero prestige facilities but everything perfectly serviceable. Classrooms roomy. New science block coming soon. Toilets are marked male and female but actually they're inter-gender. Skateboarding is mostly outside. They all know each other, of course, and mostly rub along together just fine (lots of high fives and hugs) - 'We're one big happy dysfunctional family!'. Most impressive, we thought, was the spirit in which they equably received probing, challenging questions - they never bridled. Parents do their bit with, say, an occasional paintbrush. The school likes having them around as long as they don't start backseat driving. Food is excellent, plentiful and vegetarian - to get around H & S concerns. Despite the high student-teacher ratio and small numbers, finances are sound and there's a good reserve.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

There are complex and ever-present tensions to be addressed here, strenuously and unendingly -- free expression vs foul language, exam results vs self-directed learning, the individual vs the community, spending time vs wasting time, parental input vs student autonomy... It all calls for courage, care and steadfastness and must be nerve-racking. A do-as-I-say regime would be - you see it so clearly here - oh, so much easier.

In the words of one student, 'everyone here has their own backstory'. Actually, not everyone here has a backstory, though there's an easygoing perception locally that they're all a bit bonkers. We spoke to parents whose children had no prior hangups, one whose son is quite interested in becoming a policeman. Backstories involve unhappy experiences of mainstream schools because of bullying or a cast of mind that will not surrender to demands for conformity and obedience. Sands is a happy landing for characters, daydreamers, dyslexics, eccentrics, refusers and mavericks, some stated, others not, some angry, some muddled, some howling. 'People come here to be saved' a student told us, and when they arrive -- some of them funded by the local authority -- it can take time for their sails to fill and during this phase they may bunk off bigtime until they feel calm and validated, ready to come in and do some work. For such, Sands is a therapeutic environment. Teachers reconnect them with their best interests by talking, listening and above all respecting. Parents whose daughter who had become impossibly wild and furious told us how

amazing the school had been. At a crisis, one of the teachers sat with her on the floor of toilet for three hours. It was a turning point and now she's 'as lovely as we always knew she was - lovelier.'

Liberal regimes that work require everyone to go the extra hour. We watched the school meeting debate sanctions for two students who had been making others unhappy. They were present, there were adversarial episodes - it's quite something when your peers hold up a mirror to your conduct. As a student told us 'You get big life experience here, but it doesn't work for everyone.' Another said 'Actually, there's not much here to rebel against.' And although the school clings to the conviction that 'there are no bad kids - difficult kids but no bad ones', some, rarely, don't go the distance and are excluded.

There are rules. Not many, most of ancient heritage, a bit like common law, not written down. You have to take your shoes off before you go upstairs so as not to ruin the carpets. Everyone has to play their part in washing up and cleaning the school at the end of the day. It's quite something to see a teacher doing the pot wash. If you want to smoke, a student told us, 'Go and do it alone, not somewhere idiotic and public like a bus stop'. These are longstanding conventions rooted in common sense. And the greatest of these is: 'you have to want to be here'.

First stop for infringements, disputes, etc is the school council - 6 students and a teacher - who arbitrate and make recommendations to the weekly school meeting, which is the ultimate arbiter and ratifier of everything.

Pupils and Parents

Just 15 mins by road from Totnes, epicenter of a region famously populated by counter-cultural, freethinking folk of all hues. A good demographic for Sands, you might think. Yes, some parents are principled objectors to 'factory schooling' but others are just like parents everywhere, swayed not by ideology but what works for their children. It's all about size, teaching to students' needs and personal and intellectual development - 'Our friends just can't believe the difference in them'. Many parents scrabble about somewhat to find the fees - one mum cooks lunch to help pay hers. It's not for the social cachet they go short in a good cause, but because they reckon the school brings out the most in their kids. Others, whose children the school has restored to emotional health, echo the words of one such: 'Sands is a lifesaver.' There's an early-stage PTA.

Students span the spectrum from exotic to withdrawn, all are incredibly easy around adults, they're supportive of each other and most radiate purpose. Not all, some are getting there. They're not chauvinistic, they're not inward-looking, they don't think Sands is the only school in the world. Any number told us 'This school isn't for everybody'.

Entrance

Come and do a taster week, get to know everyone, decide if you like it. Interview at the end of the week, after which your application goes to the school meeting. They won't have you if they feel they can't meet your needs or you have been a serious pain. Roughly 20 per cent from home education, 10 per cent each from Park, Totnes,

S Devon Steiner and local primaries; 20 per cent from local secondaries in yrs 7 & 8 – ‘some last less than a week before they are on the phone to us’. School website very informative.

Exit

A range of further ed choices, sixth form or FE vocational mostly – Exeter College, Kennicott sixth form and Plymouth Art College -- thence to uni, some even unto Oxbridge. Is the school a good springboard? Transition may be difficult but, having taken ownership of their education, these students know themselves and what they want, making them, arguably, high-value applicants.

Money Matters

Fees on the low-ish side for an independent day school. Expect to shell out a bit extra for the odd school trip and over-the-odds special needs. A few bursaries, income based, offering up to a third off.

Our View

The decline of difference in all mainstream schools has left Sands looking decidedly far out, incapable of appraisal by prevailing quantifiable outcomes. If you reckon it might well be the right school for your child the only way you'll know is by going to see whereupon your guts will tell you just like that whether these kids are on an incredible journey or the high road to havoc. If you are persuaded of the former, you may need to move house.

<https://www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk>