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# *Schooling Soundscapes:*

## Traditional Schooling Versus Homeschooling

Frances Dyson (1994), a teacher and media artist, describes the natural process of listening thusly: “being lost in sound is also open to different ways of thinking.”

If the priority of research is to uncover new information, it would make sense that sound could present the researcher with new data, and new interpretations of data. The evolution of sound aligns with the evolution of culture. Sounds that were once prominent in the culture are diminishing, and new sounds are taking their place. For example, in a traditional school, once the keyboards of manual typewriters could be heard, then the electric typewriters, now the sound of computer keypads; with each step keystrokes became quieter, but with no new sounds allowed to emerge.

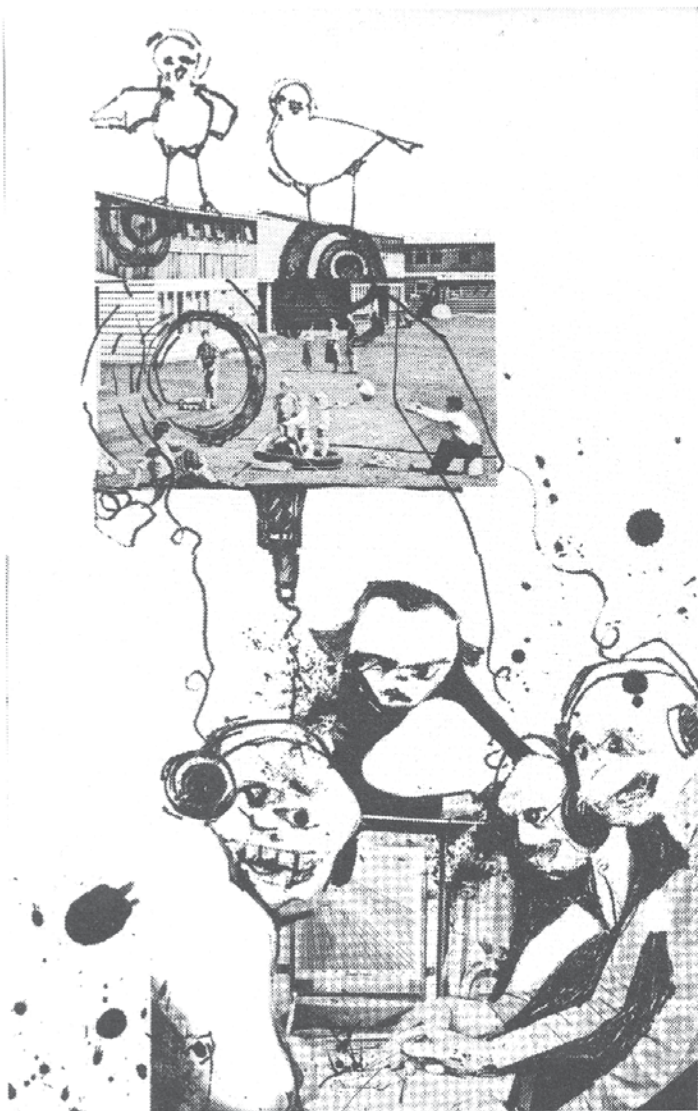
The purpose of comparing soundscapes offers observation of an environment (homeschooling) that is out of bounds to anyone not engaging in the practice. Traditional school, generally a familiar environment for most individuals, lacks considerable in-depth

audio analysis. Ask yourself, how many distinct traditional school sounds, that in this paper we will call “soundmarks” (derives from the term landmark), can you name? Depending on your personal experience the range of traditional school soundmarks may be surprising. They may also unveil hidden operations occurring in traditional schools.

### Traditional school recording.

Teacher giving instructions-- beginning of recording and end of recording

Students get up out of seats (chairs moving) and walk to the front of the room and ask instructor to use washroom. Occasional foot tapping in the back of the room. Footsteps walking around the room by the instructor occasionally stopping and (indiscernible)



*Illustration by Paul Mack, 2010.*

speaking to a student. Food wrappers being torn or crumpled (frequent). A can (sounds like soda) being opened. A computer keyboard from the front of the room can be heard through out the thirty-five minutes. Chairs occasionally creaking and scraping on the floor. Book pages being turned and loose-leaf paper being shuffled (frequent). The hum of an air filter overhead, possibly air conditioner or vent. Loud school buzzer (soundmark) at the end of the class.

The various sounds recorded in the “traditional school” setting lead to a multitude of assumptions. It is evident by the frequency of food wrappers and occasional

opening of beverages that the students are eating while they are performing a given task by the instructor. It can be concluded that in order to leave the classroom one must ask permission. The monitoring of the students is occasionally confirmed by the instructor walking around the room (twice) and making indecipherable comments to students. The drone of the air filter overhead provides an ambient quality of containment to the room. It is the only consistent sound throughout the recording. Raimbault and Dubois note that “ambient noise context appears to influence ones reaction (2005)” to their physical environment. The air filter drone may be a contributing factor to the maintenance of a subdued classroom. The physical characteristics (intensity) of the instructor typing on a keypad could suggest that the instructor is engaged in an activity that is not centered on the classroom.

There is very little human engagement with the exception of instruction and occasional questions or comments. It may be possible, considering that this was the first class of the day, that the students are not quite awake. The tapping of a foot suggests distraction or lack of engagement from the given task. It could be concluded that this is a very typical public school classroom setting. The students are familiar with the rules, operations and style of this particular instructor and have adapted accordingly.

## Homeschooling recording:

The first ten minutes of the homeschooling soundscape was a conversation with Bob, the father of Christopher, a homeschooled 12-year-old boy. The recording starts at a kitchen table with Bob and myself. The drips of an electric coffee maker float on top of the notes coming from a classical guitar. Consistent bird sounds from the outside kitchen window coincides with the consistent rhythms of the coffee maker and the guitar notes. Bob asks for clarification of what the researcher’s intent is, and a brief discussion centering on the purpose of a soundscape as a research tool follows. The conversation is brief, clarifying that the project is to record and annotate the natural sounds that occur on any given day in a homeschooling space. Bob comments,



“I never considered the sounds before. Sitting here it reconfirms my decision to allow for Christopher to be home schooled.”

Using the example of the home school kitchen sounds, the coffee dripping, bird sounds, a plane over head and a boy practicing a guitar, I asked the child, “What picture can you construct from those imagined sounds?” Her response, “it sounds like life.”

The rhythm of the ceiling fan in the kitchen replaces the drip and steam of the coffemaker. A prop airplane disrupts the interior sounds of the house. Christopher comes into the kitchen and turns on the faucet and drinks from the tap. He comments, “I am working on a piece of music by Sor. Would you like to hear it? I think I got it down.” The shuffling of objects on a counter. Christopher asks, “Dad did you see my cell?” Bob responds, “No”.

From the den, the sound of a neighbor’s garage door opening could be heard through the window. The pages of a book are turned (music on a music stand) Christopher begins to play his guitar. He stops after a number of seconds and starts from the beginning. Upon completion of the music a pause, exterior sounds of birds and a lawn mower some distance away fill the gap between the end of the music and Bob commenting “Is that the new piece you started this morning?” End of recording.

A five-year-old child recently asked me “What is a soundscape?” I described it as a picture made of sound. Using the example of the home school kitchen sounds, the coffee dripping, bird sounds, a plane over head and a boy practicing a guitar, I asked the child, “What picture can you construct from those imagined sounds?” Her response, “it sounds like life.” I then wondered, if I were

to describe the sounds of the traditional school to the child, what her response would be and what would she choose as a space to learn in?

And another question remains: is it plausible to conclude from the limited nature of this study that learning is taking place, or does the soundscape contribute to making an informed decision of choice between traditional schooling and home schooling? Blesser and Salter suggest that the soundscape is just one discipline that that contributes to various disciplines of research by “establishing interdisciplinary bridges that overcome difference in these disciplines, philosophies, theories, paradigms, methods and epistemologies” (2007). ♦

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