

*As the pressure to improve the quality of U.S. elementary schools increases, more schoolmen are looking to the British system of informal education. The essay below surveys some of the current philosophical, research-based, and practical arguments for informal education and attempts to delineate its essential characteristics.*

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### **The Selling of the Open School\***

Despite philosophical arguments attesting the humaneness of open education, the open school is not going to win acceptance by Boards of Education and administrators and parents by philosophical justification alone. The Age of Enlightenment having passed, scientific research is now invoked to legitimize many educational innovations. The only factor that carries more weight is cost. Favorable research findings are becoming more necessary, but not yet sufficient to “sell” a new idea in education.

All three forms of justification — the philosophical, the scientific, and the practical — are important. Philosophical insight permits an assessment of the logical relationships between educational practice and educational objectives. Scientific research allows for the measurement and quantification of the results of educational practice. Practical concerns dictate whether or not what is philosophically and/or scientifically valid is feasible in terms of available resources. This essay attempts to present whatever “case” philosophy, science, and practicality can make in support of the open school.

Open education is implied in an array of terms including open school, open-space school, open-corridor school, informal school, informal education, primary school, infant school, and the integrated day. Certain terms such as open-space school and primary school are misleading, while others lack semantic precision. In this paper, open education refers primarily to American adaptations of the system of informal education found in many nursery (3-5), infant (5-7), and junior (7-11) schools in England. Open education represents *an informal approach to education, especially at the primary level, involving high degrees of curricular, instructional, and organizational flexibility and premised on the notion that children learn what they want to learn, when they want to learn it, and at their own pace.*

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Locating characteristics common to schools espousing open or informal education is not a simple task. For this reason many innovative elementary schools I have visited recently shun the label “open schools”. I shall use a list of characteristics describing the English informal school and simply caution the reader against over-generalizing with regard to U.S. schools. The list is based on a careful reading of the available literature on informal education and visits to many elementary schools in New York State that are experimenting with informal concepts.

- I. Classroom Organization
  - A. Mixed-age grouping
  - B. Heterogeneous grouping
- II. Learning Environment (*Geist*)
  - A. In-and-outness
  - B. Creative room arrangement
  - C. High noise level
  - D. Gradualism
  - E. Sense of community
  - F. Respect and trust
  - G. Play
- III. Curriculum
  - A. Concrete learning materials
  - B. Few “essential” skills or knowledge items  
items
  - C. Structured flexibility
  - D. “Process” stressed over “content”
- IV. Instructional Practice
  - A. Integrated Day with “fixed points”
  - B. “Implementation” and individualized instruction  
instruction
  - C. Individualized evaluation
  - D. Democratic discipline
- V. Staffing
  - A. Multiple-staffing
  - B. Head teacher

Several cautions are necessary before I begin to discuss the available evidence bearing on the open or informal school. The criteria listed above constitute an ideal model of the English informal school — a model that probably does not exist as a single entity in reality. Secondly, the scarcity of formal research on the open school forces me to include some findings on peripheral relevance. Finally, research in education too often is expected

to measure cognitive outcomes. The open classroom, by its very nature, places equal importance on the affective and social dimensions of development.

### Research on the Open School

The most comprehensive research conducted on children educated in informal settings was published by Dorothy Gardner of The University of London's Child Development Department and cited by Charles Silberman.<sup>1</sup> She compared English children educated in formal and in informal classrooms according to a number of variables. Children educated in informal classrooms manifested superiority, often to a significant degree, in the areas of 1) spoken and written English, 2) drawing and painting, 3) listening and remembering, 4) neatness, care and skill, 5) ingenuity, 6) breadth and depth of out-of-school interests, 7) reading ability, 8) ability to concentrate on uninteresting tasks, 9) moral judgment, 10) general information, 11) handwriting, and 12) ability to work with other children. The only area where the traditional class excelled was arithmetic, and there are indications, since the introduction of the Nuffield Math materials, that this situation is being corrected.

Another study, the Lytton and Haddon longitudinal project, indicates that divergent or creative thought during adolescence is greatly affected by childhood experience with informal education.<sup>2</sup> Silberman recounts, in addition, that children of informal education pick up tasks more easily, work more effectively with other children and adults, and manifest more creative skill than their formal education counterparts. These encouraging reports come from English classes that average about 30 students per room and are often located in economically-depressed urban areas!

I do not know whether the research that yielded these encouraging results was rigorous or not. However, to date no evidence of a substantial nature has appeared critical of informal education in England or the United States. The English have shown no desire to curtail informal education, which presently accounts for roughly one-third of all English infant schools.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the highly-touted report of the Plowden Commission in 1966 recommended the expansion of informal education throughout the island.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, perhaps, British parents appear just as amazed as Americans are with the suc-

<sup>1</sup>Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 260.

<sup>2</sup>F.A. Haddon, and H. Lytton. "Primary Education and Divergent Thinking Abilities — Four Years on," *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 41, June 1971, 136-147.

<sup>3</sup>Minnie Berson, "Inside the Open Classroom," *American Education*, May 1971, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Lady Bridgett Plowden, (Chairman). *Children and Their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England): Vols. I and II* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1967).

cess of informal or open education.

In order to clarify some of the characteristics of open education listed previously, I shall discuss in brief terms some particular logical, scientific, and practical implications of the criteria.

*Mixed-age grouping.* U.S. schools began to eliminate discrete grade levels in elementary schools before the advent of open education, but the current popularity of the English system has served to spur mixed-age grouping, where children of several ages are grouped under a teacher for one or a couple of years. Such vertical grouping is sometimes accomplished in U.S. schools through the use of "clusters of" classrooms. One cluster might include several teachers and children formally in grades 2, 3, and 4. An elementary school might encompass multiple clusters. An advantage of mixed-age grouping is that continuity is maintained from year to year because there are always children present on opening day who were in class the previous semester. The English find these "experienced" children assist the incoming students in orientation.

Research on the relative merits of mixed-age and discrete-age grouping, however, displays a lack of conclusiveness.<sup>5</sup> Social adjustment, anxiety about school work, size of vocabulary, and level of school achievement are not found to be affected markedly by vertical grouping. Reading skill in certain "slow" children improved through the use of this form of grouping, but "bright" children profited more from horizontal grouping. The emotional disturbance ("admission stress") attending transfer from one class to a new one appeared to be less critical than previously presumed. Vertical grouping did produce in children aged 5 to 7, however, a wider range of immediate roles, better work attitudes, and a warmer attitude toward the teacher. These last findings suggest that a greater emotional security and stability result from mixed-age grouping. Perhaps children from disadvantaged homes can benefit from this aspect of open education.

American schools working to adapt informal education have relied on team-teaching. The English continue to work with predominantly self-contained classrooms. A recent research study does imply that team-teaching, coupled with open-space schools, yields a more constructively "active" environment than the single-teacher self-contained classroom.<sup>6</sup> No English schools, however, were examined in this study. The English admittedly lack the expensive open-space facilities (schools with a minimum of interior

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<sup>5</sup>Mary Mycock. "A Comparison of Vertical Grouping and Horizontal Grouping in the Infant School," *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 37, February 1967, pp. 133-135.

<sup>6</sup>Erika Lueders-Salmon. "Team Teaching and the 'Active' Classroom: A Comparative Study of the Impact of Self-Contained Classrooms and Open-Space Team Teaching Schools on Classroom Activity" (an unpublished study presented at the 1972 AERA convention), p. 35.

walls) that lend themselves so well to team-teaching. Instead they depend on maximum use of corridors and the school-yard. The cooperation that arises between various staff members forced to share a corridor is called "teaming" by the English. The term "team-teaching" is avoided because of extraneous connotations. In team-teaching, for instance, some doubt may arise in a student's mind concerning which adult has ultimate responsibility for him. No doubt exists in the informal classroom. Despite the presence of teacher aides, parents, student teachers, and the "head", each child has but one teacher.<sup>7</sup>

*Heterogeneous grouping.* "Streaming", as the English refer to ability grouping, is waning in popularity, largely as a result of the high incidence of individualized activity in informal schools. The English do not rely on basal reading or standardized math programs. Meanwhile, U.S. open schools continue to employ small, homogeneous reading and math groups within larger heterogeneous classes or clusters. J.M. Stephens has observed, in support of the English trend away from ability grouping, that little or no research exists to indicate the relative value of homogeneous grouping in terms of student achievement.<sup>8</sup>

*In-and-outness.* Referring to the wide use of extra-classroom environments including corridors, other rooms, and especially the schoolyard, in-and-outness has obvious practical advantages. Space is utilized more extensively and efficiently. Children enjoy greater mobility and thus are not as prone to the restless anxiety that results from too much sitting or confinement. They are able to work independently because more space inside and outside the school is available to them. The trend in the U.S., though falling short of complete in-and-outness, is toward the open-space school, equipped with clusters of classes opening onto large, airy, common areas and moveable partitions.

Research comparing the perceptions of elementary children in open-space and self-contained classrooms indicates that the first group desires more autonomy, while also seeing the need for some degree of teacher control.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps conditions present in open-space environments demand more explicit structure for learning than conditions in the self-contained room with its four walls, one teacher, and desk arrangement — factors giving such a setting a pervasive "implicit" structure. The relative merits of open-space design, however, are yet to be proven conclusively.

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<sup>7</sup> My appreciation to Pat Holmes of the East Hills School in Ithaca, New York, for data concerning the teacher in the British informal classroom.

<sup>8</sup> J.M. Stephens. *The Process of Schooling* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> R.E. Myers, "A Comparison of the Perceptions of Elementary School Children in Open Area and Self-Contained Classrooms in British Columbia," *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 4, Spring 1971, pp. 100-106.

*Creative room arrangement.* Within the open classroom, there is a marked absence of linear order. Desks in rows are replaced by work tables, sitting areas with comfortable chairs, and rugs to encourage use of the floor. In corners of the room are learning centers for science or art, a reading or “quiet” area, and perhaps a “Wendy house”. Creative room arrangement permits various activities to occur simultaneously, thus freeing the teacher for individualized instruction. “Simultaneous use” of the classroom’s learning materials maximizes the effectiveness of each item by reducing the number of students using it at a given time. Costs are curtailed by eliminating multiple purchases of learning aids for each classroom. In other words, all students do not work with the same materials at the same time. Another practical feature of creative room arrangement is the maximum visibility given learning materials. Instead of “hiding” books, games, and equipment neatly in storage areas, teachers develop attractive displays that invite students to use materials.

*High noise level.* One of the most common features of open schools is the one that lies in the encouragement of free communication between students. While research in this area is scarce, common sense seems to affirm that communication is a very effective way to learn how to communicate! In-and-outness permits the maintenance of special “quiet areas” for reading and rest.

*Gradualism.* The English display gradualism in two important ways. Students arrive each day at no set time. School is open early, and as long as all are present for Morning Service, no one gets upset. Children learn that school is not a place that opens and closes at fixed times, but instead is an accessible, friendly neighborhood center. The second example of gradualism is the process by which incoming youngsters are slowly absorbed into a class. A mother and child might come to school initially for an hour in the afternoon. Gradually the length of time in class is increased. Much of the anxiety that can attend entrance into a new situation is avoided.

*Sense of community.* In-and-outness and the high degree of student mobility couple with the small size of most informal schools in England and the active “teaming” of teachers to produce a sense of genuine community within the school. This feeling is bolstered by close ties between the school and its surrounding neighborhood. After walking their children to school, mothers often remain to chat with teachers. Parents join in work projects to renovate or modify school facilities. Contact between teachers and parents, teachers and children, and children and other children is frequent and encouraged. From a practical, as well as a philosophical, standpoint this sense of community serves the best interests of the public education system.

*Respect and trust.* In keeping with the avowed child-centeredness of the open classroom, youngsters are treated with respect and accorded a significant measure of responsibility. The word “respect”, in fact, is used far more

than words like “love” or “free” to characterize the nature of social relations in the open school.<sup>10</sup> Responsible behavior is encouraged by not “risk-proofing” the school environment too much. Children learn the disadvantages, if any, of running in the halls by firsthand experience. The emotional, as well as the physical, environment is not risk-free. Children are not shielded from all anxiety and frustration. Encounters with teachers tend to be honest interactions — if the teacher has no time or lacks the knowledge to help a child, she does not conceal the fact. The word “trust” accurately sums up the atmosphere in the open classroom. Without trust, the granting of responsibility to children becomes an empty gesture. To paraphrase a point made by A. S. Neill, trust is not license. The child knows the limits of his responsibilities, the accepted rules of behaviour, and the fact that the teacher “cares” about him as an individual. It is difficult to isolate trust for research purposes, but empirical observation reveals classrooms that are not chaotic or without discipline. Children are rarely destructive. They are lively and productive as a rule.

*Play.* That young children learn through playing is a fact long known to researchers. Montessori and Froebel wrote on the necessity for play, and Piaget, among other recent writers, has supported this fact with extensive research. The noted Swiss scientist contends that the child organizes information and constructs ideas through *action* upon the physical environment and interaction with others. Play becomes a primary component of the child’s intellectual activities (assimilation and accommodation). Hence, the fear expressed by many parents and educators that play represents wasted time is invalid. Open education openly encourages play by providing adequate free time during the day and numerous materials and tools with which to experiment. In analyzing the components of play in a U.S. open classroom one researcher reported the following breakdown: 1) small manipulative play — 30%, 2) large construction — 43%, 3) role play — 13%, 4) formal dramatic play — 4%, and 5) organized games — 10%.<sup>11</sup>

*Concrete learning materials.* Play relates directly to the wide use in open classrooms of “concrete” learning materials like blocks, toys, games, aquaria and terraria, live animals, and boxes. Use of these tangible learning materials, as opposed to texts and written operations, is not without scientific validity. Piaget notes four stages of cognitive development. Most elementary school children perform at the third level, called the level of concrete operational thought. Simply put, concrete operational thought means the child can think abstractly about objects he sees and touches and can solve simple problems and perform trial-and-error experiments, but he

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<sup>10</sup>Anne M. Bussis, and Edward A. Chittenden. *Analysis of an Approach to Open Education* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1970), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Hirabayashi, “An Ethnographic Analysis of Open Classroom” (an unpublished manuscript prepared for the 1972 AERA convention), p. 13.

cannot yet think abstractly about things he cannot see or touch nor can he grasp certain complex concepts like time. Piaget and Montessori demonstrated that learning during childhood is contingent on the concreteness of the learning materials. For practical purposes, lectures and discussion about abstract concepts may well represent wasted time and energy in the primary grades. The effective teacher provides an object-rich environment and allows the children to engage in self-directed learning. Most writers on the subject agree that one of the most critical functions of the open classroom teacher is the selection and arrangement of imaginative and stimulating "stuff" for the children.

*Few "essential" skills.* Each child tends to have different learning interests and unique ways of acquiring the skills necessary to pursue these interests. The English informal teacher avoids prescribing a set of basic or "core" learnings for those reasons. Basal readers may be available in the class library, but reading is not pursued systematically or in the homogeneous groups. Instead, most objects in the room are labelled in big print to familiarize the child with words. The teacher works individually with the children to develop reading skills. The previously mentioned research of Gardner suggests that this informal approach to reading, if not to match, produces results comparable to those achieved in formal classrooms. American adapters of the English system have been reluctant, however, to leave the acquisition of "basic" skills to the child and his teacher. Homogeneous ability groups in reading and math prevail in the U.S.

*Structured flexibility.* A key word in open education is flexibility, especially with regard to the curriculum. In effect, each child possesses his own curriculum, with each child selecting somewhat different learning experiences, and this differs from individualized instruction, where each child works alone on essentially the same learnings.

The task of selecting potential learning experiences is the function of the teacher, although the children often make suggestions. The materials to facilitate these experiences are arranged into interest areas, like a science corner or a block room. Materials are rotated periodically and every child, no matter what age or "ability", has an opportunity to investigate them on his own. Many teachers prepare sets of "activity cards", each containing a simple objective and instructions. Children are free to select any card they wish and follow the instructions until they feel ready to solicit the teacher's opinion.

The combination of abundant and carefully selected learning materials and their organization into potential "experiences" give the seemingly "unstructured" open classroom a real and effective "implicit" structure. Needless to say, extensive teacher preparation is a prerequisite for open education.

*“Process”, not “content”.* Curriculum materials in open education tends to encourage the development of learning processes more than the acquisition of facts and concepts. Piagetian research indicates that concept learning should be postponed until the advent of formal operational thought around age 11. Childhood is best occupied with exploration, simple classification, quantification of concrete objects, trial-and-error activities, and other relatively unsophisticated learning processes.

*Integrated day with “fixed points”.* Many informal classrooms are tending toward a completely integrated day, implying a school day undivided by specific work periods in predetermined subject matter areas. The English infant schools continue to retain, however, a minimum number of “fixed points” in the day to enable children to meet together and utilize single resource people. The standard “fixed points” include Morning Service — a time for meditation and general discussion of the day’s activities, lunch — with adults and children usually eating together, “music and movement”, and physical education. Some informal schools also delineate “free choice” and prescribed-work periods. The trend toward the integrated day is in keeping with the open school’s belief in individualized education.

*“Implementation” and individualized instruction.* The open school does not strive simply to prepare the child for the next level of schooling. Each child is acknowledged to possess certain needs and interests unique to his age and stage of development. “Implementation” implies that one of the teacher’s functions is to implement a child’s interests or “purposes”. In other words, the teacher must begin where the child is, but make certain that he is not left there. In guiding children to new knowledge and skills, the teacher relies greatly on individual contact. Unlike the “free school” (where student contributions are high and teacher contributions low) or programmed instruction (where both teacher and student contributions are low) or the traditional, lecture-based classroom (where teacher contributions are high, but student contributions low), the open classroom calls for high degrees of student *and* teacher contributions to the learning environment.<sup>12</sup> From a practical standpoint, the open classroom achieves an optimal relationship between teacher and learner.

“Implementation” and individualized instruction have been implied in several terms, including “incidental teaching”, “unobtrusive teaching”, and “lateral interchange”. All these labels convey the essence of instruction in open education, i.e., the absence of formal, didactic teaching between a superior and an inferior person. Each student becomes involved in determining what he is to learn and at what rate. Learner involvement in these instructional decisions, however, should not be understood to mean teacher abdication of responsibility. The teacher serves as a guide, a facilitator, a

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<sup>12</sup>Anne M. Bussis. *Op. Cit.*, p. 23.

reference source, a friend, and a diagnostician.

As Gardner and Cass point out, individualized instruction is not the sole mode of instruction in the informal classroom.<sup>13</sup> Large and small group activities do exist; however they tend to be child-centered rather than teacher-centered.

*Individualized evaluation.* Open education does not stress sophisticated measurement of achievement or emphasize behavioral objectives.<sup>14</sup> Teachers evaluate on an informal basis and usually according to no fixed standard. Expectations differ from child to child. Youngsters learn to accept error and occasional failure as natural. Opportunities for consistent success abound. The anxiety attending early experience with continual failure, so well described by Glasser, is minimized, thus preventing children from "turning off" to school at an early age. The fact that the open classroom is an enjoyable place for a youngster to be has obvious practical and philosophical implications.

Most English teachers keep descriptive, anecdotal records or "jottings" together with samples of children's work. Reporting the progress of individuals is accomplished through parent-teacher conferences rather than report cards. Conferences reinforce the close ties between home and school and involve parents more directly in their children's education.

*Democratic discipline.* Rules for behavior are kept to a minimum in informal classrooms largely as a result of the pervasive atmosphere of trust between child and adult. One American open school principal explained the practicality of this trust. Too many rules result in a child's attending more to avoiding capture than being careful. A youngster running in a hallway and having to keep one eye peeled for a teacher is more likely to get hurt than a child who watches with both eyes where he is going!

When rules do exist in the open classroom, they either pertain to matters of physical safety or respect for others. The usually high noise level, for example, abates near reading areas. Children are involved in rule-making, which is yet another way adult trust in children is manifested. The presence of an environment in which children are free to communicate, wander, and choose activities eliminates the need for many of the inane and inhibiting rules public school critics condemn. Certainly, the open classroom is more in keeping with a democratic philosophy. From a practical perspective, the absence of arbitrary or senseless rules frees the teacher to be a teacher instead of a disciplinarian. There is no evidence that fewer rules in open schools results in more accidents or destruction of property. In fact, obser-

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<sup>13</sup>Dorothy E.M. Gardner and Joan E. Cass. *The Role of the Teacher in the Infant and Nursery School* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1968).

<sup>14</sup>Anne M. Bussis. *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

vers claim just the opposite is true!

*Multiple staffing.* A recent trend in informal schools in England and open schools in the U.S. is the involvement of more than one adult in classroom activities. Student teachers, parents, welfare workers, and teaching assistants are utilized as resources people in an effort to provide more individual attention for each child. The teacher is freed to plan and intervene in special "problem" cases. Caution must be taken, though, to avoid an overpopulation of adults in the classroom. Such a situation might create confusion in the child over who is the teacher. Research suggests that the success of multiple staffing, like virtually everything else in the school, is contingent on the teacher's support and follow-up.<sup>15</sup>

*Head teacher.* Another critical factor in the apparent success of English informal education is the autonomy of the school principal or head teacher. Unlike American principals who spend a disproportionate amount of time on administration, the "head" serves as a master teacher or supervisor of instruction. She advises her staff and often intervenes in particular learning situations. Her office usually takes on the character of another classroom. Because of her constant contact with teachers, the "head" is able to keep abreast of classroom needs and professional problems. The autonomy of the head teacher permits more on-the-spot decision-making and less time is wasted in dealing with a central administration.

#### Conclusion

Having described some of the essential characteristics of open education, with special emphasis on the English experience, I wish to isolate several traits that seem to be particularly important. First, the average informal school is small. The English are not fussy about class size, which often exceeds 30, but schools with more than 320 students are considered too large.<sup>16</sup> Small schools facilitate in-and-outness, student mobility, and a sense of community. Structured flexibility is the second important factor. Without flexible approaches to the curriculum and to instruction, it is doubtful whether many of the distinctions between the formal and the informal school would be meaningful. Skilled teachers represent the third critical characteristic of open education. As most who are familiar with the English informal schools acknowledge, open education is not a vacation for the professional. Individualized teaching, diagnosing student problems, and creative room arrangement require energy, intelligence, and imagination.

Recently Marilyn Hapgood cautioned against too rapid an introduction of informal education to the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Expectations for immediate success are

<sup>15</sup>Richard Hirabayashi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>Edward A. Chittenden, "Notes on Visits to Primary Schools in England," *Outlook*, Winter 1971, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Marilyn Hapgood, "The Open Classroom: Protect It from Its Friends," *Saturday Review*, September 18, 1971, pp. 66-75.

dangerous. Many fail to realize that the English took forty years to develop their current practices and the system is still evolving. Hapgood's level-headed admonition, however, should not serve to obscure the philosophical, scientific, and practical arguments in support of open education. If one objective of education is to provide learning experiences in harmony with children's natural growth, then logically the flexibility and free choice of the open classroom are desirable. After all, no two children develop in quite the same way or according to the same time schedule. If another objective of education is to stimulate the acquisition of essential skills without sacrificing affective and creative growth, then existing research points again to open education. If a third objective of education is to utilize instructional time and resources efficiently and effectively, then from a practical standpoint open education is a sound choice.