

The British Primary School

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MANY Americans have become familiar with terms such as "Leicestershire model," "integrated day," "open school," or "activity-based classroom"—all used to describe a style of learning associated with elementary education in England. The terms mean very different things to different people. To some, these terms imply a philosophy rooted in the tradition of Piaget, Isaacs, Bruner, and Dewey; to others, a "play" approach to education is a style which disregards the skill development of young children, substituting a loose, permissive, play-centered curriculum. To still others, the terms recall an image of airy schools with carpeted classrooms divided into activity areas stocked with a variety of educational games, work cards, and manipulative equipment.

Whatever the image, it is often accompanied by superficial understandings of the concepts behind what has become a revolution in primary education. Specifically, many concerned with the education of American inner-city children suspect that whatever is happening "won't work for these children."

One reason why confusion and misunderstanding exist is that it is difficult to see beyond the physical nonconformity of the "English" classroom in a short period of observation. It often does appear chaotic, noisy, and perhaps "unstructured." Traditional rows

of desks have been replaced by a limited number of chairs and a strange assortment of tables and room dividers. Children move freely from one activity to another (often from one classroom to another), sit in the corridors, or lounge on the floor of a headmaster's office. The classroom is a collage of sand, water, blocks, pretty books, colorful wall paintings, animals, plants, cooking pans, and dollhouses.

All this may make an immediate and disconcerting impact on the American observer, for the underpinnings of the system are not easily discernible. Yet, a philosophy of education unifies the total environment; there is a special attitude toward children and how they learn. There is a sense of pace, a commitment to the dignity of children, and an exciting confidence in the spontaneous. There is a belief in the rigor of exploration and in individual independence that can be seen only over a long period of time when one has the opportunity to observe individual children, examine the role of the teacher, and study the variety of materials available to the children. Only then do the excitement and challenge of a truly child-centered curriculum become apparent.

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Misconceptions

Perhaps it is not only that the English approach is so difficult to "see." Quite possibly Americans bring assumptions to such observations which color perceptions and restrict understandings. We may be trapped in mythologies of past failure and frustrated by demands of the present. Educational jargon also creates confusion. "Student-centered" may be confused with "individualized instruction" which can be programmed; "team teaching" can mean two individuals who simply share a common group of students; "model" may imply "experiment"; "play" often is contrasted with "work" and "teaching" associated with "manipulation." Such confusion has created blinders, limited understanding, and stifled vision.

Further, an emphasis on reading and math achievement scores so thoroughly permeates American educational thinking that even the newly developing community-controlled school boards are affected. They are largely convinced that their children's educational success or failure stands or falls on the Metropolitan Achievement results or on monthly comparative levels of reading and math scores.

Individuality

What is perhaps most impressive about the English system is its commitment to the individuality of the child. The English would no more insist that all children begin to read or to add at the same age than we would expect all children to begin walking or talking at the same age.

What one finds in a good example of an English primary school classroom (which may just as likely be housed in an antiquated 19th-century structure as in a modern building) is a learning environment rich in materials (both homemade and commercially produced). Pupils move within it exploring their enthusiasms while teachers ensure that various opportunities for experience push them toward deeper understandings and broader areas for continuing independent investigation.



Pupils carry on activities in several areas.
Photographs courtesy of the authors

Children frequently work in small groups or as individuals exploring, building, reading, listening, or discussing. They wander from one "activity bay" to another, reading a book, writing a story, "selling" milk to classmates in a model shop, designing the sections of a wall mural, or following a series of teacher-prepared task cards.

Some may be measuring and then recording the comparative weights of acorns, buttons, rocks, and empty milk bottles. Others might be wiring the rooms of a dollhouse, baking biscuits, or tending to the gerbils. Activities will spill over into corridors where library corners or workbenches may be found, or into the school hall where a small group may be playing musical instruments or watching a BBC broadcast.

The playground is often a focus of activity; and some school heads have all but abdicated their rights to privacy by utilizing

their office for a "quiet" room, available for reading and solitary pursuits or, as in one case, for a school "broadcasting station" equipped with a tape recorder and with a hookup to the school public address system.

The child may begin his day by painting, move into story writing, and end up in the math corner. Sophistication varies according to the interest and developmental level of the child. Whatever the level, the child is challenged to push further and to extend his world.

Student Interaction

A most striking feature of the English classroom is the quality of student interaction. Students talk to and help one another throughout the day. Groups of children form, dissolve, and regroup depending on the activity, the interest of the child, and the supportive role of the teacher.

A fairly widespread practice is to assign



Pupil investigates capacity of different containers.

children "vertically," mixing five-, six-, and seven-year-olds in one class. The talented five-year-old can and does work at advanced levels while the slower seven-year-old may find both materials and companions appropriate to his skills. Older children often take "teaching" roles, and there is no arbitrary "grade level" to achieve at a specific age before "passing" on to specifically assigned new work.

All activity, however, is not individual. At various points larger groups of children come together to watch a television broadcast, to plan a field trip, to refocus attention on the options available in the class, and so on. Children often discuss their choice of activities so that the selection may be feasible, given limits of equipment and space. Children quickly learn, for example, that there is only room enough for three or four to enjoy the animals corner at any one time. Youngsters learn to rely less on the teacher and more on the resources available around them. They become more independent as learners, able to concentrate on one consuming interest for extended periods of time.

The Teacher's Role

The environment described here dramatically alters the traditional role of the teacher. Rarely is the teacher seen with the entire group before him. No longer is he the sole individual to whom the child relates or from whom the child must always seek help or support. The teacher moves around the class from one child to another, from one group to another. He makes suggestions, demonstrates, explores with the child and, more important, asks questions.

It is the teacher who helps the child cope with the environment of the class and develop the kinds of disciplines he needs to function effectively. Rather than attempting to hold the attention of 30 students, the teacher will channel his energies into varied tasks, helping children achieve meaningful relationships with their peers, discussing implications of an experiment, developing an understanding of the importance of putting materials away when finished so they may be used by others.

In short, the teacher becomes a facilitator, a person who exercises discretion regarding the choice of materials he brings into the classroom and in the way he helps the child make use of these materials. The teacher sets an atmosphere in which children move forward in rigorous inquiry-based pursuits enjoying their self-chosen work.

Perhaps the most difficult task for the teacher is to decide when *not* to intervene in a particular situation. As paradoxical as this may seem, such an action involves as positive an educational decision as does direct interaction.

Who Teaches

Because of the flexibility of such classrooms, it is not uncommon for children in some schools to drift from one classroom to another for particular activities. The child quickly learns that one member of the staff may be especially keen on music and may gravitate to this teacher's room for part of the day. Another child may find someone other than his class teacher more able to help with math, science, or art. Another may find a teacher other than his own simply easier to talk with.

In such an environment, these shiftings are permissible, often encouraged. Indeed, this approach encourages an effective use of staff specialties and allows for real interdisciplinary activities to develop. It means that children can benefit from such individual strengths without having to wait for the once-a-week specialist to appear or for the next year's new class assignments.

In this respect, everyone with whom the child comes in contact becomes drawn into the learning process. High school students, parents, school secretaries, school keepers, and visitors alike can be actively involved in the child's explorations, for all have strengths and experiences to offer.

Even the school head is very much part of the "teaching" staff. Most English primary school heads spend at least part of their time in an active educative role with students. They may be the enthusiast behind a specific project or simply an added adult to whom to

go with questions and for newly discovered answers.

It is important to note here that promotion to principal does not, therefore, mean the mere assumption of administrative tasks, but rather, as use of the term "head teacher" implies, includes a continued role in the classroom with added responsibilities as a teacher trainer.

Relevance

It would seem apparent that an approach to learning which provides opportunities for meaningful, relevant, and successful experiences for children has a great deal to offer to Americans—especially at a time when school people are searching for ways to restore community confidence in public education. While the features described here are not typical of all English primary schools, they are characteristic of many engaged in the "integrated day." Obviously each school will have made its own individual adjustments to the scheme, opting for various modifications or experimenting with different materials, concepts, or class organization.

What seems constant throughout the various schools, however, is the quality of the relationships between people. Every individual is treated with dignity. Between teacher and child, teacher and teacher, child and child, teacher and head, head and child, head and educational authority—at any level, the relationship is one of mutual respect. A concrete example of this quality is the increased use of "advisors" rather than "inspectors" or "supervisors" sent by the authority to visit classrooms. Growth through understanding rather than change by edict is accepted practice as well as theory.

What relevance does this British system have for the United States? Clearly, it cannot be imported intact. Unique American situations must be considered and fundamental adaptations made. Yet what ultimately may happen will depend, it seems to us, on what commitments we are willing to make to the individuality and independence of children, not as an experiment, but as a philosophy of education. □

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