

# The "Open-Space" Plan in Education

I. EZRA STAPLES \*

THE "Open-Space Plan in Education" reflects an attitude rather than a mere physical arrangement—an approach to teaching rather than a facility—a restructuring of the curriculum and of the teaching-learning setting rather than an educational fad or frill.

The specific applications of this concept are varied and are known by many other names: the "open school," the "open classroom," the "free school," "informal education," the "integrated day," the "integrated curriculum," the "free day," the "British Infant School," and the "Leicestershire Plan." This concept is committed to the ideal of individualization of instruction and is the antithesis of the type of classroom in which the teacher stands before the class, dominates the lesson, and in which the pupils seated before him are exposed to the same learning experience at the same time.

Of the two elements comprising the term "open-space," "open" is the more basic and significant concept. To be meaningful and to have integrity, "openness" must be characterized by approachability, relaxed and informal control, ease of communication, mutual supportiveness between teacher and student, and a stimulating learning environment. Thus, providing additional "space" will not alone assure improved learning. The potential of this approach can only be realized by the utilization of "space" in terms of

our commitment to provide optimum educational advantages for each child.

## The Open-Space Classroom in Action

Let us visit an open-space classroom now in operation in the Philadelphia Public Schools. (I am carefully avoiding calling it "typical" because open-space classrooms differ according to the personalities and needs of the individuals using them.)

In this classroom, there is considerable movement by children and teachers. Many activities go on simultaneously; these may even go on outside the classroom. Children are free to choose what they want to work with, to keep at it as long as their interest holds, and to put away their work when they are no longer interested in it. The child's previous experience and current interests determine what activities he will undertake. The fluidity of the room makes it possible for children to do what is very natural to them: to work together and to teach one another.

The teacher's role is flexible. He does not direct all of the activity, nor does he choose how and in what order children will learn. *The emphasis is on the child learning,*

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rather than on the teacher teaching. The teacher provides the materials, keeping them varied and easy to work with and to put away. Continually moving around the room, he helps the children make choices, asks questions which will extend an activity, directs them to resources within the room, and comments on their work.

In addition, he observes the child, diagnosing his strengths and weaknesses, and records his progress. He makes his plans not on the basis of a preconceived curriculum but according to the needs of the child. At times, the teacher might work with one child; at other times, he might work with the whole class. At no time is there a rigid schedule.

### The Open-Space Plan in Great Britain

Classrooms committed to this philosophy were first developed in Great Britain and are most widely found in the Infant Schools, which children attend between the ages of five and seven. Although such classrooms represent a half-century of development there, they grew most rapidly after World War II. Today, about 25 percent of all primary schools in Britain feature the plan and another third are moving in that direction.

Of particular significance to American educators is the fact that the open-space plan has been found in Britain to provide effective learning for children of all backgrounds—for urban slum children as well as for those in the suburbs and rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

### The Open-Space Plan in the United States

The Open-Space Plan of Education was first called to the attention of many American educators by Mrs. Lore Rasmussen of the

<sup>1</sup> For specific illustrations of British Infant Schools, see: John Blackie. *Inside the Primary School*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967; and Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970. pp. 207-64. For an excellent description of the Westfield Infant School in Leicestershire, which has been visited by many American observers, see: Beatrice and Ronald Gross, editors. *Radical School Reform*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1969. pp. 196-201.

Philadelphia Public Schools, who developed the concept in the early 1960's independently of the British models. Another early proponent was Lillian Weber of New York City, who observed British Infant Schools. These schools were also widely publicized in three articles by Joseph Featherstone in *The New Republic* during August and September 1967.<sup>2</sup>

Today, open classrooms can be found in such places as San Antonio, Texas; Johnson County, North Carolina; Santa Barbara, California; Salt Lake City, Utah; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Tucson, Arizona; Portland, Oregon; Minot, North Dakota; and in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. The number is steadily growing.

<sup>2</sup> These articles were based on the now-famous "Plowden Report." For further details, see the "Suggested Readings" section at the end of this article.



Photos courtesy of the author

Previous experience and current interests help the child select activities.





Materials and equipment are available for use by pupils.

In 1970, the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity funded the operation of 12 Open Classroom Training Centers in nine cities. These centers are part of the Follow Through Program and are intended to give impetus to the continuing development of children who participated in Head Start. The Ford Foundation has also provided funds to develop open classrooms in public schools.

The Educational Development Center (EDC) of Newton, Massachusetts, is furnishing leadership and direction to the expansion of these efforts. Utilizing the talents of such educators as Rosemary Williams, former head of the Westfield (Leicestershire) Infant School, EDC provides assistance on a national level in organizing and conducting open-space classrooms. Its services consist of advice, consultation, workshops, curriculum materials, and free publications.

## Other Open-Space Plans

1. *Learning Centers.* As organized by Mrs. Lore Rasmussen, a Learning Center (there are nine in the Philadelphia Public Schools) is a room where children have free and easy access to purposefully selected materials and equipment such as microscopes, adding machines, typewriters, tape recorders, record players, and opaque and film-loop projectors.

Also available are raw materials such as sand, water, soil, buttons, sticks, pebbles, and

rocks (used for estimating, counting, and weighing); balances, scales, thermometers, trundle wheels, tapes, and meter sticks (used as weighing-measuring devices); rods and building blocks (used as models for arithmetic operations and volume measurements). Children have additional access to art materials, writing supplies, books, and games. Experimental play and construction, self-initiated problem solving, and fluid pupil-teacher interaction are but a few of the learning activities which evolve.

2. *Math Laboratories.* The Philadelphia Public Schools have over 50 Math Laboratories serving grades K-12. These informal, activity-centered classrooms feature the discovery approach to learning, the emphasis being on materials developed in the Madison Math Program. The open-space setting contains other materials such as Cuisenaire rods,



Discovery is stressed in the math laboratory.

geoboards, Dienes Logical Blocks, Pattern Blocks, mnemonic devices, and teacher-made resources.

3. *Instructional Materials Centers.* IMC's are found in almost all Philadelphia public schools and are organized to encourage independent study and research. Learners using the IMC's have convenient access to books, charts, pictures, films, filmstrips, and tape and disc recordings. The key words to encouraging a true open-space learning environment in the IMC's are "convenient access," for if materials are not made easily available, the discovery element intrinsic to this type of experience is lost. In addition to providing the learner with a rich environment where he can "do his thing," the IMC's supply another element basic to the open-space concept: namely, skillful teacher guidance.

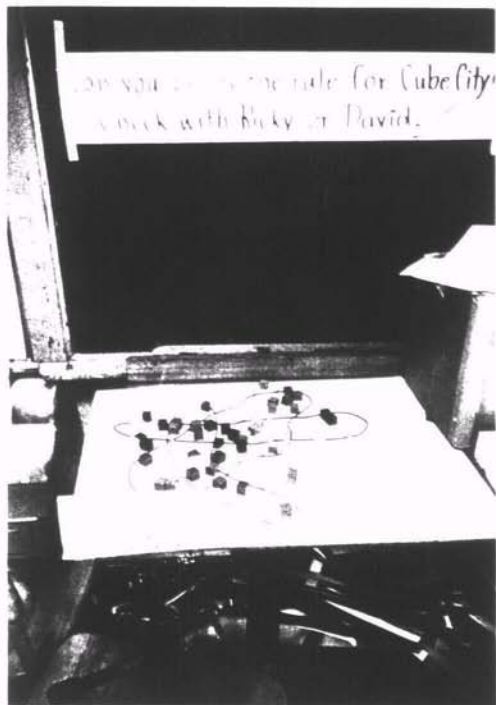
4. *Intensive Learning Center.* One such center is now in operation in the Philadelphia Public Schools for grades K-6. It features three models, one of which, the Inquiry House, operates on the open-space plan. Its staff includes a teacher with five years' experience in the British Infant Schools, and a writer and sculptor in residence.

The Inquiry House does not use expensive hardware. Generally speaking, teachers create their own materials. For instance, a visitor may find children trying out different experiences in science by using a series of homemade circuit boards consisting of a light bulb and batteries. With these, they can discover for themselves open, closed, parallel, and multiple circuits.

5. *The John Hancock School Program.* The Hancock School (K-6) has an open-space plan reminiscent of the British Infant School. Of particular interest are the successful steps taken to provide an optimistic answer to the view that the plan is "a flower too fragile to survive" because "the demands on the schools today are harsh and often narrow."<sup>3</sup>

The Hancock School has met this prob-

<sup>3</sup> Beatrice and Ronald Gross. "A Little Bit of Chaos." *Saturday Review* 53 (20): 71ff.; May 16, 1970.



The open-space setting invites use of special mathematical materials.

lem through extensive community involvement: 65 parents spend at least one morning or afternoon a week working with children in an open-space environment. The parents receive in-service training from Hancock teachers in the use of instructional aids and textual materials; they work with children on a one-to-one basis, the objective being to help learners overcome skills deficiencies diagnosed by the teacher. Concomitantly, they become familiar with the desirable features of the open-space plan; and, in the course of gaining greater understanding, they may become its most enthusiastic partisans.

6. *The Parkway Program.* The open-space plan of learning can transcend the boundaries of four walls. The Parkway Program High School—Philadelphia's well-known "school without walls"—exemplifies this, for its students learn by using the city's



myriad cultural, scientific, industrial, business, judicial, governmental, and social welfare facilities.

The administration of the school represents a radical departure: three self-governing "communities" consisting of teachers and students. Each community has a weekly "town meeting" at which the students tell their teachers what they wish to learn and the teachers function as resource persons who advise them how to go about obtaining the knowledge they seek.

Many of the specialists the students learn from are not certified teachers but professionals actually working in their fields; for instance, journalism is taught by reporters in the city room of their paper, gem cutting by a jeweler in his shop. Students also meet twice a week for a two-hour tutorial in such "standard" subjects as English and mathematics.

#### 7. *The Reading Skills Center Program.*

Reading Skills Centers, housed in many schools in Philadelphia, illustrate another application of the "open-space" concept in education. Children, either individually or in groups, come into the center and have their individual reading needs analyzed. In continuing visits to the center, they move freely from place to place within the center to materials and equipment locations. In these areas, on a self-instructional, structured basis, the children can address themselves to



Individual needs are analyzed in reading skills centers.



Creative expression is encouraged in a relaxed setting at Parkway School.

attacking their reading problems and meeting their needs.

Aides are a valuable asset in the centers for, as children work at individual pacing, there is a constant need for extra hands to check completed work. Children keep records of their own progress and review these with the Reading Skills Center teacher who teaches individual children or small groups if a common need arises.

A child when frustrated receives immediate help. If the student is bored he is encouraged to choose other materials or to work in another area at that time. Because of the unique method of operation, the teachers have seen severe discipline cases become interested participants who have begun to grow in reading in the wholesome, open, structured, yet flexible atmosphere of the center.

#### **Guidelines for the Open-Space Plan**

Merely adopting the outward trappings of the plan is no guarantee of its success. Like any other means of reaching an end, if

the plan is used, it must be used well. Therefore, the following guidelines are suggested:

1. The teachers involved should believe sincerely that educational change is needed and desirable.

2. Teachers should have sound and realistic knowledge of what the open-space plan entails.

3. The desire for change should not be motivated by the "bandwagon" or "fad psychology" aspect of educational reform.

4. The creation of suitable physical facilities is not enough to ensure an effective educational program. Planning and staff development are of the utmost importance.

5. Know what you want to do. "Fuzzy" goals will result in an insipid, disappointing program.

6. Teachers must be treated with "openness." They must be fully cognizant of all aspects of the program and must be regarded as the leaders in program development.

## Readings

### BOOKS

John Blackie. *Inside the Primary School*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967. (Price: \$1.00. Can be purchased from the Sales Section, British Information Services, 845 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022.)

Central Advisory Council for Education. *Children and Their Primary Schools* (The Plowden Report). Two volumes. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967. (Price: Volume I: The Report, \$4.95; Volume II: Research and Surveys, \$5.85. Can be purchased from B.I.S. mentioned under Blackie.)

Beatrice and Ronald Gross, editors. *Radical School Reform*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1969.

Herbert R. Kohl. *The Open Classroom*. New York: A New York Review/Vintage Book, Random House, Inc., 1969.

Vincent R. Rogers. *Teaching in the British Primary School*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970.

Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970.

### PAMPHLETS

*The British Infant School*. (Price: \$1.00. Can be purchased from the publisher, Institute for Development of Educational Activities, P.O. Box 446, Melbourne, Florida 32901.)

The Educational Development Center, 55 Chapel Street, Newton, Massachusetts 02158, publishes many pamphlets relating to the British Infant Schools. Sample titles:

• David Armington. *Plan for Continuing Growth*. (Relates the Infant School plan to Follow Through.)

• William Hull. *Leicestershire Revisited*.

• Rosemary Williams. *Reading in Informal Classrooms*.

Lore Rasmussen. *Creating a Mathematics Environment in the Elementary School*. Philadelphia: Instructional Services, The School District of Philadelphia, 1968.

Lore Rasmussen. *Pondering, Puzzling, Playing: An Approach to Mathematics for Young Children*. Philadelphia: Instructional Services, The School District of Philadelphia, 1968.

### ARTICLES

Joseph Featherstone. "Schools for Children: What's Happening in British Classrooms." *The New Republic* 157: 17-21; August 19, 1967.

Joseph Featherstone. "How Children Learn." *The New Republic* 157: 17-21; September 2, 1967.

Joseph Featherstone. "Teaching Children To Think." *The New Republic* 157: 15-19; September 9, 1967. (Reprints of the above three articles may be obtained from *The New Republic*, 1244 Nineteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.)

James D. Greenberg and Robert E. Roush. "A Visit to the 'School Without Walls': Two Impressions." *Phi Delta Kappan* 51 (9): 480-84; May 1970.

Beatrice and Ronald Gross. "A Little Bit of Chaos." *Saturday Review* 53 (20): 71ff.; May 16, 1970.

Vincent R. Rogers. "English and American Primary Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 51 (2): 71-75; October 1969.

Bonnie Barrett Stretch. "The Rise of the 'Free School.'" *Saturday Review* 53 (25): 76ff.; June 20, 1970. □



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