

# OPEN SCHOOLS ON THE BRITISH MODEL

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LAST spring and summer, one of my graduate students did an extensive study of a number of primary schools in Britain. She undertook the study with an air of intelligent and thoughtful cynicism; by her third school visit her log began to reflect the enthusiasm—even awe—which we have come to expect from Americans who are exposed to British schools for the first time.

With Charlotte's permission, let me share with you a simple description of what was happening in the Dover Road School in Kent on the morning of June 21, 1971.<sup>1</sup>

Sue's room—8 and 9 year olds—class has 29 pupils, 2 absent.

*Two girls* at back table making chart on heartbeats—from sparrow to hibernating frogs (fastest to slowest)—includes teachers' and children's heartbeats—girls are in process of inking in the chart with colored ink.

Reading corner, *girl* writing about gerbils (has their cage in front of her while she's writing, she pokes them for me to see when I walk by), *girl* writing about birth (class has just seen sex education film), *girl* writing creative story, *boy* reading *The Silver Sword*—(boy completely oblivious to rest of class, forgets to go to lunch when class dismissed, has to be touched by teacher to go).

Center table, newt (kind of water lizard)

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Koskoff included these notes in an informal paper written for my class in the summer of 1971.

in fish tank, *one boy* sketching it, *one boy* observing it and recording observations of its movements, *one boy* writing about it from information in resource book in front of him.

*Girl* at solitary desk writing about Japan, using two resource books.

*Three boys* working with dry cell battery at one desk—teacher working with them.

*Two boys* working from same math card (probabilities and squares)—*one boy* working from math book—all at own desks in four-desk group.

*Two girls* completing maps of Japan for own books on Japan—*two boys* and *two girls* working on writing and illustrations for own books on Japan—*one girl* copying Japanese painting from book, using fabric and sewing rather than painting—*one boy* copying different Japanese painting same way—all at long group of desks at back of room.

*Two girls* writing about birth—*one girl* drawing a fetus, copying from resource book—all in own desks in four-desk group.

On one bulletin board children's compositions and drawing about pregnancy and birth.

On other bulletin board children's Japanese ghost stories—children told me teacher had read them Japanese ghost stories in conjunction with class work on Japan, then urged them to write own Japanese style ghost stories.

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## Marks of the Informal School

This gives one something of the flavor of the good British primary school in action—although this is neither the time nor the place for extended descriptions of such schools.<sup>2</sup> Let me say at once, however, that the Dover Road School is in no way a “model”—it is both like and unlike the dozens of informal schools I have visited in Britain and in America, virtually all of which are distinguished more by their uniqueness and diversity than by their uniformity. Nevertheless, informal schools do have some broad qualities and concerns that distinguish them from formal or traditional schools, and it

<sup>2</sup> Such descriptions are readily available in: Vincent R. Rogers. *Teaching in the British Primary School*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970; Mary Brown and Norman Precious. *The Integrated Day in the Primary School*. New York: Agathon, 1969; Lillian Weber. *The English Infant School and Informal Education*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971; Liza and Casey Murrow. *Children Come First*. New York: American Heritage Press, 1971.



Informal British schools stress learning that proceeds from the concrete to the abstract.



Children are seen as unique in terms of total growth patterns.

may be useful to list some of the most important at this point.

1. Informal British schools are distinguished by the degree to which they have become “de-institutionalized.” Children move relatively freely about such schools, in classrooms and corridors alive with color and things of all sort. Old chairs, rugs and carpets, ovens and animals, all give a warm, human, non-school (in the traditional sense) atmosphere to the building.

2. Teachers seem to accept a fuller, broader interpretation of the idea of “individualization.” Children are seen as unique or different in terms of their total growth patterns as human beings rather than in a narrow, skill development sense.

3. Teachers in informal schools place far more value on detailed observation of a child's work over a long period of time as a primary evaluative source than they do on more formal testing procedures.

4. Teachers (and headmasters or principals) play a far more active role in making day-to-day curricular decisions of all kinds than do their counterparts in more formal schools. If, in fact, teachers are more attuned to children and their needs and interests in such schools, city- or district-wide “programs” or curricula make little sense, and the *individual teacher* becomes a dynamic curricular agent.

5. Teachers in such schools seem to accept fully the notion (so much the essence of Piaget) that children's learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, and that *premature* abstraction is one of the great weaknesses of the traditional school. Thus the emphasis on concrete materials, and encounters with real people and places whenever possible.

One must hasten to add that little of what was said above is really *new*. These ideas have been with us literally for centuries—yet, suddenly in the late 1960's and now in the 70's they seem to strike a particularly responsive chord among many American teachers, parents, and administrators. Why?

I suppose one could be cynical and say that this is due largely to the American penchant for change—the need to be publicly involved in innovation. For some, this is no doubt true. Others, I think, are caught up in the charisma of Britain itself, and their anglophilia makes them admirers of anything and everything British. Still others find that the call for warmer human relationships among teachers and children in informal schools fills some *personal* need that remains



Students in informal schools become deeply absorbed in their work.

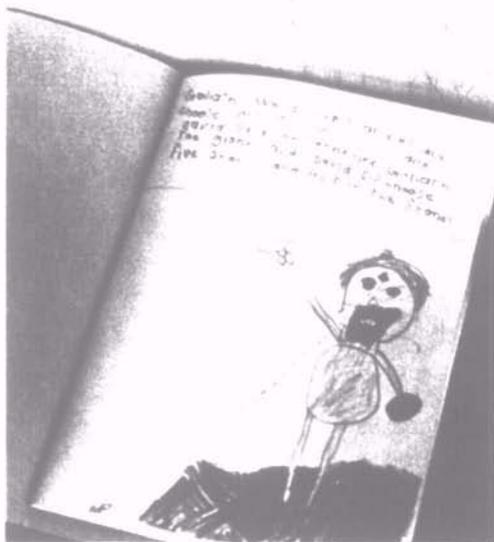
unsatisfied in the web of relationships that exists in many traditional schools.

## Reasons for Change

I would like to suggest four reasons that go beyond the explanations given above, however—reasons that may explain this phenomenon in less negative terms.

First, it seems to me that Americans have become far more critical—introspective if you will—concerning the quality of life in America today. Our concern with the environment, with the increasing mechanization of our lives and the lack of meaningful human contact, has made us more susceptible to a set of educational ideas that have been the concern of relatively few people in the past.

Second, the hopes for significant educational reform which grew out of the “curricular revolution” of the 1960's have simply not materialized. Many of the programs and curricula have already been abandoned, and (with some exceptions, such as EDC's *Man: A Course of Study*) those that are being utilized seem to result in a classroom atmosphere and school environment that differ very little from what used to be. Clearly “scholars,” “the disciplines,” “experts,” and “universities” all had their day in the 1960's. Some observers believe that the needs and interests of individual *children* were never seriously considered by the reformers. The



Teachers observe the child's work over a period of time.



The obvious happiness of British schoolchildren impresses observers.

truly child-centered approaches of the British primary schools, however, seem clearly to fill that gap.

Similarly, many concerned with the education of the poor in America's urban ghettos recognized in the British informal approach a disdain for the variety of standardized, "objective" tests that did (and do) so much to label and categorize children. The notion of the importance of believing in oneself—of developing self-esteem among such children—loomed as a critically important factor. Here at last was an approach that made this idea central to the ways in which schools could be run.

Finally, though perhaps simplistically, American observers in British schools were genuinely taken with the obvious *happiness* of British children in their schools. They were impressed with the degree to which such children became deeply *involved* in their work. These two points are, of course, closely related. If, in fact, American schools were "grim" and "joyless," the British schools clearly were not.

At this point in time, there is an almost frightening interest in the British primary school approach in America. "Experimental" or "model" programs have sprung up everywhere, most notably in New York City and Philadelphia, in North Dakota, Colorado, California, Vermont and, of course, in Connecticut. Such schools are fairly widely distributed on an imaginary educational continuum that runs from "formal" to "infor-

mal"—yet all do at least cluster on the informal half of such a continuum.

American innovators have found that their concerns for more flexible uses of classroom space fit well with British notions, as do procedures suggested by the concept of differentiated staffing. Teams of teachers working cooperatively together (including teacher aides, interns, and student teachers) are often found in American informal schools, and the traditional British concern for environmental studies also coincides with current American interests. Clearly, where such schools have developed, teachers have begun to play a far more significant role in the day-to-day running of school affairs. Likewise, principals interested in fostering informal schools have recognized the importance of the *professionalization* of the teachers.

There is, of course, an almost desperate plea for research—for evidence—among those who find these ideas appealing but lack the conviction of their British counterparts. Silberman describes the existing evidence (most of it supportive of informal education, incidentally) as well as anyone in *Crisis in the Classroom* (Random House). The Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey (working with EDC), has begun to develop techniques for measuring the development of the sort of mathematical understandings not tested in standard achievement tests yet likely to be developed in informal classrooms. Graduate students at a number of universities are developing studies dealing with a whole host of questions related not only to achievement but also to the day-by-day quality of life of children in formal and informal classrooms.

In the meanwhile, however, children are five or six or seven only once in their lives, and many Americans are adopting informal approaches because they believe deeply that the assumptions underlying this kind of education are sound and supportable *now*. They base their beliefs not so much on "scientific" research as on the collected wisdom of teachers from Montaigne to Whitehead and beyond, who seem so often to arrive experientially at conclusions so clearly exemplified in the British primary school. □

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