

Open Education: In Britain and the U.S.A.

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OPEN education, as defined by the British Primary School model, is fast becoming a popular rallying point for liberal educators. What Americans tend to overlook in their enthusiasm, however, is that the "integrated day" or "open classroom" is essentially an indigenous and peculiarly British creation that arose out of specifically British conditions. A brief look at some of the contrasts between American and British educational systems should help us to rethink the wisdom of attempting to transplant open education full-grown into our public schools.

Local Control

The most obvious difference is that England has a state system of education as opposed to local control. Actually, management of British schools is a joint enterprise of the national government and the Local Education Authority (LEA). LEA's do have the right to control hiring, firing, and generally what goes on in specific schools, but the National Ministry is responsible for providing initiative in promoting new educational policies and enforcing national policy. This somewhat ambiguous sharing between state and locality seems to perform the important function of insulating school systems

from direct social pressures of narrow interest groups. English teachers are on record as being opposed to a return to local control for fear it would undermine their professional autonomy.

The legalistic forms are less important than the traditions, however. Probably the single most significant factor in the English system, as far as open education is concerned, is the almost complete autonomy of the British headmaster with respect to what is taught and materials used. In theory, the LEA probably could exercise the kind of stifling control so common to American school boards. In practice, however, the Head's authority is rarely challenged; this seems to be the result of long-standing traditions of leaving education to the teachers, and a desire to allow the Head to get on with the job. No such tradition, of course, exists in the United States. In the pioneer days every town or hamlet worth its salt created its own schools; having created them, the people naturally assumed the right to decide what went on in them. In America, education remains everybody's business.

The net effect of local control here has

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been to reduce the school curriculum to the lowest common denominator. Being directly susceptible to pressure from interest groups, the schools have been forced, out of self-defense, to adopt a policy of eliminating *anything* controversial. Political life and emotional life have become too hot for schools to handle. And so we find a discouragingly sterile uniformity in schools as institutions, and a remarkable resistance to change. In this context, the dangers of trying to introduce a more open system of education with all that it implies of traversing new, uncharted, and perhaps controversial waters are apparent.

This is in stark contrast to Britain where the Head's autonomy, combined with the different role he plays as compared with an American school principal, provide a strong impetus toward experimentation. For the Head continues to be a teacher, spending most of his day in the classroom. American elementary principals, on the other hand, average only 4 percent of their time teaching, and 70 percent do no teaching at all.¹ Put together, these factors make the Head both likely and able to give teachers greater freedom than his American counterpart.

The Inspector's Role

Another important factor has been the role of the National Advisory Council and Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). In both cases, the opportunity to encourage innovation and change was enhanced because of the relative immunity from pressure groups. The Advisory Councils have in fact given important support and encouragement to open educators, most notably in the Plowden report released in 1967.

The inspectors have been perhaps more crucial agents of change. In part this is due to a shift in emphasis of their duties from one of an authoritarian policeman to one of a supportive advisor. The inspectors have also become somewhat akin to missionaries: absorbing the best of educational thought and

practice and disseminating it wherever they go. In this capacity they have become important agents of reform and innovation in some situations. Aside from a few fledgling consultant agencies, American education has nothing remotely analogous to these inspectors, and even our consultants are hired (and fired) by local boards in most cases.

College admissions requirements are an important inhibiting factor on radical experimentation in American public schools. In Britain, where only 8-10 percent of college-age youth is actually in college (as compared with 50 percent in the United States), this constraint is not nearly as important.² Thus, while the early selective system of 11-plus examinations might appear to be an inhibiting factor, its net effect was the opposite in many cases, simply because getting into the college stream was irrelevant. It is no accident that open education arose first in working-class communities like Leicestershire where college admissions are relatively unimportant.

Teacher training programs also helped in the rise of open education. British primary teachers go through a joint training program with nursery teachers which is separate from other teacher training courses. As one might imagine, the emphasis of such courses is heavily upon child development theories, particularly those of Piaget, which are generally congenial with an integrated day program.

The situation precipitated by World War II seems to have had influence in promoting change in British schools. During the war, when civilians were evacuated to the countryside, teachers were forced to improvise. Many were astonished to discover that they were able to dispense with "essential" aids. The situation after the war when a teacher often found himself faced with children who had been scattered all over the English countryside for three or four years, and who were at widely varying stages of development, helped kindle interest among British educators in finding a new way of schooling.

One of the most distinctive features of open education is its grassroots nature. Its derivations come less from abstract theories

¹ Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970. p. 275.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

than from the "muddling through" of countless classroom teachers striving to find a better way. Indeed, it can reasonably be argued that there was no such thing as a "philosophy" of open education until after the academicians created one to fit the practice.

An Act of Faith

The fact that things happened as they did stems from the *ad hoc* quality of British education: it always seems to be adapting to the needs of the moment. Practical necessity as opposed to theory appears to be the backbone of the system. And this in turn stems from what may well be the most important quality of all as far as open education is concerned—*trust*. The LEA rarely challenges the Head's authority, not because it does not have the power, but because of a feeling of trust in the Head's ability and sincerity. To the extent that this view is reflected by the Head toward teachers, it also frees them; and it plays a part in encouraging teacher trust of students, a quality noted by almost all observers of open classrooms in Britain. Trust in the school and, more important, trust in people, would seem to be an important facilitator of open education in Britain.

In this regard, comparison with American schools is stark and tragic. Accountability is the latest byword, by which proponents seem to mean accountability in detail for what goes on in classrooms: no longer is a teacher to be allowed even the limited amount of freedom she formerly had teaching the prescribed curriculum. The trend seems to be toward less trust in teachers to do the job, in students to learn, in schools to teach. In such an atmosphere, it is hard to imagine open education flourishing since, at the beginning at least, it seems to be largely an act of faith, requiring a long view of education and a willingness to abandon safer, more readily measured standards of achievement.

When one looks at the obstacles in the path of open education in this country it is easy to despair; at times it seems as if we

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must wait for a historical accident such as World War II in Britain to jar the schools into change. Certainly the notion of importing "Leicestershire" is a falsity. Yet there is evidence of a growing concern for humanistic values in American society in general and among youth in particular. While I, too, am concerned over the apparent immutability of our schools as institutions, I think we should also recognize that people are changing, and that in the final analysis it is people who run the schools.

I trust it is clear that any open educator who hopes to change American schools must deal with a far different set of problems than he would in Britain. He cannot rely upon a school's autonomy to protect his project in its nascent stages; he will also have to work through and with the various groups in the community. It seems unlikely that an end-run around the local community is going to be successful in the long run.

The task for open educators is formidable, but not impossible. In a long-range sense it implies no less than a thorough re-education of people to accept the values of open education. It probably means the long, tedious job of working within and through the system for change. On the brighter side, I believe there is a humanistic streak in American culture which can be harnessed in support of open education. There do exist elements within American society that favor the open educational approach: there is a residual belief in pluralism (however little it may be practiced), in the worth of the individual, and in the ideal of self-realization as a goal in life. Let me finally affirm my belief that this goal can be accomplished, that it will not be quick or easy, but that the end result must be a distinctly American version of open education, a result far more meaningful and longer-lasting than we otherwise could expect.

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