

# OPEN SPACES—Closed Learning?

CAROL SEEFELDT

**H**URRY, hurry, hurry—knock out the walls, build new schools, be open! Eliminate the walls, open the schoolroom, and you will open minds, freeing children to learn. Or so the theory goes. Surely if you once got rid of those restricting classroom walls, then learning would become free, teaching would be a flexible activity, education would at last, even if from necessity, become a truly innovative, viable force in the lives of children.

Open spaces are here, and have been for a number of years. The newness of these schools is impressive. The lush carpeting, the color-coded furniture, the openness itself, along with the excitement of participating in an experiment, permeate the building, leaving the casual observer feeling hopefully encouraged. Yet if one settles down to carefully observe and scrutinize the teaching-learning process that is taking place in many open schools, the observer leaves with a somewhat different and disquieting feeling. Open spaces, it has become apparent, do not necessarily guarantee freedom in the classroom. Freedom to learn, to grow, and to select your own learning activity does not seem to be a function of walls or lack of walls.

## Freedom Is an Attitude

Dewey once said that freedom is a mental attitude. A free person, a free pupil, was one who explored, experimented, and then made application of his discoveries. Freedom, to Dewey, was the part the individual plays, through thinking, that is unique to each person.<sup>1</sup> Only the attitude of those around the child, and the child's attitude itself, can secure this particular type of freedom. Open spaces could, however, give the learner the place to explore, the room to experiment in, and the openness to make application of his discoveries.

Freedom does mean more than being without walls. Open spaces, with 100-125 children in any one given area, often negate the very freedom they are designed to foster. It is now evident that a popular way to "handle" over 100 children in a room without walls is to divide them into smaller groups, on the basis of some IQ score or achievement test, and then to schedule these groups through various learning segments. Rather than each child being free to select his own learning activities for the day, or to determine

<sup>1</sup> J. Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1944. p. 301. (Revised.)

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for himself how he will practice a particular skill or reinforce a new concept, he is tightly bound up in a group, rigidly programmed throughout the day, week, or even month.

Under these conditions, learning quickly becomes a fragmented series of changing groups and teachers. Isolated bits and pieces of learning develop, with each particle separated from the other, and with no one segment bearing any relationship to another. Any connection between these fragments of learning, or application of them to life and living, is difficult to observe.

If freedom is characterized, as Dewey said, by exploration and experimentation, then children must be provided with not only the opportunities to explore and experiment, but also the materials to examine and investigate. Children's work with natural materials—wood, mud, sand, and water—is often negated in open spaces. It is true, some materials are available for children in open spaces—children can explore art materials during art time, or musical instru-

ments during music time, in the music or art room, with another teacher, and at a previously scheduled time.

### Paper and Pencil Reign

Paper and pencil—neat and clean, easily accessible to large numbers of children—appear to reign as the prime materials for exploration and experimentation in far too many open space schools. Learning stations, designed to meet individual differences and foster exploration with various materials, have evolved into a paper and pencil experience. A cardboard box is covered with bright paper, and a ditto sheet is attached to it. The children cluster around the "learning" station, painfully copying the ditto work onto their paper with a pencil.

Another paper and pencil project, the use of dittoed workpages, or workbooks, multiplies as teachers attempt to prescribe for and meet the individual needs of the children. Prepared learning kits are also heavily

relied on in many open schools. These kits, consisting of carefully structured learning segments and preconceived sequences of drills and exercises that are either passed or failed, trap the children into a program of artificial learning. Multiplicity of learning styles is ignored as the material prescribes identical tasks and sequencing for each and every child. The material the child will act on, and react to, is limited to a shiny card and a wax pencil, while the only activity involved is the movement of the pencil and the mechanical replacing of the completed card.

Rather than freeing or individualizing, these activities serve to destroy individualization and originality. A child's confidence in himself, thought to be strengthened by presenting him with a set of carefully sequenced, instantly correcting, self-reinforcing experiences, is in fact being undermined. The child in this situation has no control over his learning, no real part in it. No intellectual initiative takes place, there are no materials for him to explore and make observations on, to reflect and to test his ideas with. Here the child is the docile subject; he selected neither the material nor the activity. No curiosity led him to using the workpage or the kit sheet, no discoveries are made—either the answer is right or he must do another page before going on—and thus the child ends up interminably reproducing a set of unrelated adult-chosen, fragmented facts.

Dewey felt that this type of learning produced an intellectual servility and was fitting only for a type of society in which the individual did not have aims or ideas of his own, but responded to the order of some authority.<sup>2</sup> Certainly it is not the type of learning suitable for children preparing to live within a democratic system. "An American school ought to be especially full of the joys of liberty, the joys of openness, the joys of movement and of choice and fluidity. Ours is the land of the free. It will continue to be, if our schools are freedom-full today."<sup>3</sup>

Open space schools do hold the potential

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Hymes. *Teaching the Child Under Six*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968. p. 6.

to actualize their goals. They could work to free the child to learn by promoting true individualization of learning, with the child making the choices of the materials, activities, and content. In actuality there are many open space schools, as well as traditional schools, that do in fact demonstrate how perfectly open, how free and meaningful, schools can become. These schools have demonstrated the possibilities inherent in open spaces. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is just as easy to restrict learning to rigid segments in open spaces as in closed classrooms.

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In education the pendulum swings, and everyone goes to the peak with it. Hurry and open up the school—get rid of the walls—and you will open learning! Perhaps educators will need to examine and reexamine what does, in fact, occur within open spaces. Analysis of the problems, the strengths, the weaknesses, the pitfalls, and the successes of open space schools is a prerequisite to opening more and more open spaces. Administrators and teachers alike should be allowed to prepare for the experience of freeing children to learn.

The promise is there, but time, study, and work will be required before open schools are able to free children to learn as individuals, to be free to establish their own learning style and pace, to be free to select their own learning activity. Open spaces will become viable only as educators become concerned enough to analyze objectively what does occur in open spaces, and astute enough to actualize the goals of open spaces—freeing children to learn.

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