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"Open Education": Some Comments

Rochester, New York

Dear Editor:

Mr. Pilcher's article, "Open Education: In Britain and the U.S.A.,"¹ is by far the most lucid, objective, and realistic of any I have read on this subject since the topic became newsworthy. We are indebted to him for concluding on a positive and hopeful note since many of us continue to value the basic philosophy of trust and respect upon which open education is founded.

Indeed, an "American version" of open education can be the kind of rewarding experience for children in our country that the British Primary School is for children in England. Those who understand and believe in the principles on which it is built need time, faith, and more supporters like Paul Pilcher.

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Dear Editor:

I enjoyed reading Pilcher's article,² as he pinpointed some of the essential factors involved in the evolution of "open education"

¹ Paul S. Pilcher. "Open Education: In Britain and the U.S.A." *Educational Leadership* 30 (2): 137-40; November 1972.

² *Ibid.*

in England and Wales. (Scotland has a separate educational system.)

However, I should be grateful, through your pages, to comment on a few of the author's statements, which could leave an erroneous impression with the reader.

I will restate Pilcher's point and then comment, in turn.

Quote. "... while the early selective system of 11-plus examinations might appear to be an inhibiting factor [for radical experimentation], its net effect was the opposite in many cases, simply because getting into the college stream was irrelevant."

Comment. "Open education" started in the nursery and infant schools in England, and it *virtually remained* at that level until, in many cases, the 11-plus examination was gradually abolished by an increasing number of LEA's (Local Education Authority). It was then that "infant methods" began to permeate up through the junior schools (7-11 years).

In fact, in 1964, when the whole issue of the 11-plus was being widely discussed, the following statement appeared in a specially prepared summary of the situation:

"... any examination or test provokes teachers and/or parents to attempt to prepare children for it; the 11-plus procedures involving tests have a "backwash" effect on the primary schools, and this is widely held to cramp educational initiative, by defining the syllabus in the fields tested and by giving them so prominent a place in the curriculum as to reduce the time given to other subjects not tested. . . ." (*The*

Reorganization of Secondary Education. Third edition. London: National Union of Teachers, 1964. Appendix II.)

The quotation is originally printed in a publication of the National Federation for Education Research, and thus would be considered a *very valid* indicator of the effects of the 11-plus *inhibiting initiative*.

Quote. "It is no accident that open education arose first in working-class communities like Leicestershire where college admissions are relatively unimportant."

Comment. Leicestershire is not considered a working-class community. College admissions, or, more accurately, the opportunity that passing the 11-plus examination gave for eventually attempting Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations, is *not* relatively unimportant. The examinations are set by various universities in the United Kingdom, and passing them provides

the adolescent with a passport to many endeavours, including college entrance consideration.

Leicestershire was one of the first counties to remove the inhibition of the 11-plus examination, when it implemented the Leicestershire Plan, in parts of the county, in 1957.

This plan, plus the encouragement provided from the central office, were factors that gave impetus to the "product" that can be seen in the county today.

Quote. "Teacher training programs also helped in the rise of open education."

Comment. While the colleges of education may be helping now, it was the colleges that were following the schools in the 1950's and early 1960's, when "open education" was being established.

Quote. "British primary teachers go through a joint training program with nursery teachers which is separate from other teacher training courses."

Comment. Nursery education is not compulsory in England, and many nursery-trained teachers are not recognized as qualified teachers. Further, many colleges of education that train primary teachers (5-11 years) do not train nursery teachers. Consequently, the implication drawn by the author is difficult to agree with.

Quote. "... the emphasis of such courses [in the joint training programs mentioned] is heavily upon child development theories, particularly those of Piaget. . . ."

Comment. While Piaget may well be the pivot today, in many programs, he was certainly not in the 1950's, when many infant schools (5-7 years) exemplified "open education." Piaget's popularity has been a phenomenon of the 1960's (as in the U.S.). His ideas have been found to support and enrich much *existing* practice in the infant schools. All that can be said on this point, therefore, is that although Piaget's ideas were *not* instrumental in creating the current practices in primary schools, they did undoubtedly (as did the Plowden Report) provide an impetus for an extension and enrichment of the methods.

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* No yearbook issued in 1941.

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