

# Structuring for Open Education

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"SCOPE"—not a toothpaste, not a mouthwash, but a realistic approach to openness for today's schools. "Scope" is an acronym for Structuring Classrooms for Open Education. Why structure? This author sincerely believes this is a needed ingredient for school people who want to move toward more individualizing and personalizing instruction, that is, toward more openness. Needed are more structure, more planning, and more evaluation in order to provide children with the kind of humanistic education which the world of today and the world of tomorrow demand. In addition, this approach to openness might well alleviate the numerous cries of "chaos" when parents, communities, school boards, and administrators hear the term "open" education.

It is important to understand that even with the elements of structuring, planning, and evaluating one can still provide children an education with a humanistic base. Such a program will continue to foster the characteristics of problem solving, self-concept, discovery, and inquiry. In other words, one can have openness in his classroom and still have clear objectives, firm direction, and meaningful patterns of learning.

This author recently returned from his sixth trip to England where, as in the past, he spent much of his time observing and

working in British infant and junior schools. Some observations and reflections of these experiences follow. These experiences, in fact, support the contention that structure, in a positive sense, is needed to make open education work.

## One Infant School—Background

One of the schools visited by the author was the Beavers Lane Infant School in the Borough of Hounslow, in the suburbs of London. The children who attend the school come from extremely low economic groups. The school's population consists of students from military families living in barracks, children of families who have been relocated because of the inner London slum clearance project, and children of general working class families. Consequently, the head mistress spends a great amount of time dealing with welfare, social work, and probation departments. In addition, children come to the school with a great lack of language facility as a result of their home environment, broken families, and working mothers and fathers.

In spite of the composition of the school

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population, Beavers Lane has been able to provide a very individualized and personalized program for children in a quite open climate. The curriculum is divided into three major areas: language, numbers, and drama. Each teacher is responsible for her particular area, but has the opportunity to explore as many other areas as possible. The thrust of most activities is to interest children in such a way as will involve them in their own learning.

As one observes and works in the school, he senses a tremendous enthusiasm on the part of both teacher and pupils as they work together in small groups or as a total group, depending on the activity or activities.

On warm, sunny days, such as that on which the author visited the school, the children and teachers freely use the outside area for their activities. They seem to flow freely in and out of the classroom, always

cognizant of their involvement and the tasks to be accomplished. Because of the variety of activities and learning tasks available to all the children, one is constantly aware of the sustained effort exhibited by each and every child. As part of his visitation, this author spent approximately half a day observing a number class within an integrated day environment.

### **The Integrated Day—A Number Class**

In this number class three children were measuring flour, water, and orange juice in order to make cookies. After measuring the ingredients, they became involved with additional number activities by cutting out squares for each member of the class. After these three children finished their project, other children became involved with the same procedure.



*Photos courtesy of the author*

In open education, the teacher serves as facilitator and guide to learning.

At the same time, another child was coloring numbers, another was counting, two other children were painting and finishing their projects, four children were individually taking a number count regarding the upcoming football match between Chelsea and Liverpool, four other children were working with counters with the teachers. There was an abundance of activity, interest, and sustained effort on the part of each of the 31 children in the classroom. Those children who were not involved were questioned by the teacher as to their activity or lack of it. The room was alive with number concepts and activities, but also there was ample evidence of language and creative activities present, such as science interest centers, art projects, writing, and verbalization. Other activities which the author encountered included:

- Measuring each other to find the tallest, and the shortest, boy or girl
- Measuring hand spans—number of hand spans needed to fill the inside of a truck
- Motor skill development
- Questions on who wants to be a nurse, a hairdresser, a fireman, or a policeman
- Art



Physical as well as intellectual exercises have their place in the integrated day.

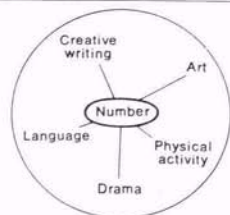


Figure 1. Flow of Activities in a Number Class

- Drawing pictures of their concept of football players on the field
- The flower shop—using tissue to make flowers, and selling them, which entails using money
- Using the water table to measure water—how many cups in a gallon jug, etc.

A visual diagram (Figure 1) shows what this author perceived to be a usual day in a number class.

The same type of diagram could be drawn for language and/or drama. A typical day at Beavers Lane Infant School is arranged according to a schedule which allows each child intensive involvement with all three areas—language, number, and drama. At the same time the schedule allows each teacher the opportunity to explore any other area that she and the pupils decide upon.

9:00–10:30	language number drama
10:30–11:00	free play
11:00–12:00	language number (change) drama
12:00– 1:30	lunch
1:30– 2:35	language number (change) drama
2:35– 3:15	play and activity.

### Structured Openness

The use of the integrated approach, coupled with vertical grouping (that method of organization in which individuals of different ages are placed together in the same



class), ensures heterogeneity and expands opportunities for freedom of choice, flexibility, facilitation of PIES (Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Social) development, and individualization of instruction. Furthermore, progressiveness and personalization of learning experiences are enhanced through this type of school organization. The integrated day approach, or unstructured day, can be achieved only by having a highly organized classroom which, in turn, relies on a highly structured environment.

As Mary A. Mycock points out in her chapter "Vertical Grouping in the Primary School,"

Critics of vertical grouping often raise the problem of standards. They fear that some children may underfunction in a school situation not definitely systematized to follow a syllabus or may lack the stimulation of a change of teacher at the end of each school year. Research undertaken by the writer indicated that there was no evidence whatsoever of lower standards of attainment in a vertically grouped situation. Furthermore, there was evidence that the vertical organization was productive of better work attitudes, of higher levels of aspiration, and of less discouragement in failure.

Opponents of vertical grouping also point to the dangers of overpossessiveness or overprotectiveness on the part of a teacher who might become too attached to a group with whom she sustains a relationship over a period of years. Vertical grouping demands great maturity on the part of teachers, and it would be unwise to change over to it, unless teachers are ready for it and understand all the implications of the changeover.

Research by the writer into effects of lengthened teacher/child relationship revealed more highly integrative relationships in the vertical group and therefore greater emotional security for the children.

Certainly, vertical grouping is not the universal panacea for all school problems and inadequacies, and any educational enterprise depends on the quality of the teachers who are implementing it. We cannot separate organization from teachers. The quality of the teacher is of crucial importance in a vertical classification, but it would be idle to suggest that this is not also true of the traditional classification. The quality of an environment depends on the



Pupils flow freely from one activity area to another. Science interest centers, art projects, and other creative activities complement skill-building tasks.



A structured open classroom allots time and opportunities for reading together—and for working quietly.

adults who provide it, and the Plowden Report on primary education suggests that teachers and their attitudes might possibly outweigh all other considerations and influences.<sup>1</sup>

This author concurs that one of the most essential characteristics of making an open classroom work is the attitude on the part of the teachers involved in the process. When teachers possess the philosophical dimensions which reflect acceptance of the child's human worth and dignity; have an appreciation and recognition of individual differences; realize that learning occurs through experience, through positive reinforcement, and through motivation; and when teachers can truly understand that when children have some stake in deciding when and where they will learn, as well as what and how, opportunities for sustained effort and concentration are enhanced.

### A Constant Renewal of Hope

If one hypothesizes that the only three legitimate goals in education are the development of skills, the goal of empathy, and the goal of identification, then it appears that the greatest arena for this type of curriculum

<sup>1</sup> In: Vincent Rogers. *Teaching in the British Primary School*. London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1970. p. 58.

planning and engineering is the open classroom. As we reflect on the status of open education, it appears that what is needed is more structure, more planning, and more evaluation to make it work. What is needed, above all, are *competent humanists*—those who can guide children, facilitate their learning, and assist in managing their environment. Also needed are teachers who possess, or at least wish to possess, the attitudes so essential in working with young children in an open environment.

Open education offers each child and each teacher a great deal of freedom, responsibility, and provision for individualizing instruction. Based on sound philosophical and psychological principles of Piaget and others, open education enhances attention and interest through choices as to what to learn. Such an approach, in turn, does not detract from what has traditionally been considered the "essentials" in learning.

Finally, it might be said that the open school concept, whether it be in England or the United States, is a concept which properly conceived and implemented can be the vehicle for unlocking the doors of learning for each and every child within a truly child centered, humanistically oriented environment. □

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