



Open Education and Native American Games

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The alarming failure rate of Indian students in schools must be halted. Perhaps open education can offer a partial solution to some of the problems relating to the education of Native American pupils.

IN CURRENT educational jargon, open education is the phrase used to describe a student-centered approach to education which utilizes informal teaching methods in a flexible learning environment. Actually, open education cannot be described precisely because its implementation will vary according to the needs of the local situation. This is as it should be. However, there is a frame of reference or a philosophy which undergirds open education and which may be delineated fairly well.

A selected few of the basic characteristics of the open classroom, as perceived by the authors, will be examined first in this article and will be contrasted with those of a more traditional setting. Next, an attempt will be made to link these characteristics with certain values inherent in most Indian cultures. Finally, the end product, hopefully, will be a rationale for providing open classrooms in schools in which Native American pupils are in attendance. One has only to glance at the continued alarming drop out

rate of these students to conclude what we have known for a long time—that traditional education simply has not met the needs of large numbers of American Indian students. There are, however, alternatives appearing on the horizon. Open education is one such alternative.

Qualities of the Open Classroom

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of an open classroom is the flexible use of space, furniture, and equipment. Materials are arranged in learning centers which provide for the simultaneous occurrence of a number of activities. Absent are the neatly arranged rows of desks facing the teacher's desk and chalkboard. Instead, there is freedom of movement as students work in various areas of the room during the day. The teacher, too, is highly mobile and generally can be found where the need for his or her help is greatest at the moment.

Such a room arrangement almost rules

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out large group instruction. Rather, it encourages the teacher to interact with individuals and small groups of students and greatly increases the communication and interaction among pupils (strongly discouraged in a traditional classroom setting). Thus, there is a shift of emphasis from the impersonal nature of traditional education to a personalizing of learning in which the needs and interests of the learner form the basis for assignment to learning centers. In other words, there is a great deal of personal freedom and student decision-making as the *individual* is all-important in the open classroom.

Sharing is a behavior which is promoted in the open classroom. Children share equipment and materials. They share ideas and even solutions or answers, too. In fact, students are encouraged to help one another except when evaluation procedures are being employed. Students even share the teacher as he or she moves from group to group and pupil to pupil to meet the demands of each situation.

However, competition is not lacking in the open classroom. But the emphasis is away from pupil *vs.* pupil competition. Instead, each student is challenged to compete with himself or herself—to better his or her own achievements and to develop his or her personal potential to the maximum. Competition with others, when the groups or individuals are not evenly matched (as is most often the case in the “typical” traditional classroom), is often destructive of self con-

cept and can result in negative and even hostile feelings toward self and others. Competition with oneself, on the other hand, is positive and beneficial and helps bring out the best in each individual. Some group competition is found in open classrooms but it is judiciously implemented and carefully monitored.

The open classroom is characterized not only by a flexible physical arrangement and organization of subject matter, but also by flexible daily time allotments. Students work in large blocks of time and there is an absence of strict adherence to time schedules so characteristic of the traditional classroom. This does not mean that overall time allotments for subject matter areas are ignored. However, correlation of content areas is encouraged and time schedules are deemphasized on a daily basis as pupils are free to work at a pace which is comfortable for them and which will allow each student to complete a task to the best of his or her ability. Time is viewed as a variable which will change as the nature of the tasks to be accomplished changes and as the needs and interests of pupils change.

The open classroom is a permissive classroom—not permissive in the sense that students are free to do *whatever* they wish; but rather, that they are free to make choices and to assume responsibility for their own actions. These factors are related to the role of the teacher in an open classroom. Traditionally, the teacher was not only the instructional leader but also the authoritarian whose

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task it was to "keep children in line." Thus, the teacher assumed the responsibility for the actions of all the students. In fact, in the past, often a teacher's success was measured by the ability to *control* the behavior of students. In such a situation, there is little opportunity for pupils to develop self-direction. Students frequently resort to "games," the object of which is to see how much they can "get away with." Often when the authoritarian teacher leaves the classroom, chaos breaks loose almost immediately! Not only does the traditional setting limit students' personal development, but it is also unhealthy in terms of growth toward self-reliance and independence.

In the open classroom, the teacher remains the instructional leader, the manager of the setting for learning, but there is a shift in responsibility for student actions from the shoulders of the teacher to those of the students. The teacher is a resource and a guide. He or she is there to help children solve their own problems and to encourage them to explore alternative courses of action and to make and live with their own decisions. It is permissiveness of this kind which enables the student to grow in trust of self and of others. The ability of students to assume responsibility for their own actions, when allowed to do so, is truly amazing. Self-directedness is perhaps one of the most outstanding and positive characteristics of the open classroom which seemingly can function at times without the teacher, once the "machinery is in operation."

Indian Values and Open Education

In looking at some traditional Indian values and attempting to relate these to the previous discussion, it should be noted that various groups of Native Americans differ widely from one another, for example, in history, language, and culture. Nevertheless, it appears that certain core values run throughout these diverse cultures which can be identified and which may be referred to as a bond of "Indianness" which ties together Native American peoples.

Native Americans respect and value the



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dignity of the individual. Children are afforded the same respect as persons as are adults. Consequently, the open classroom with its emphasis on the individual's wants, needs, and interests, and on the personalization of instruction would appear to offer a better fit for the child from a similar background in the home. The impersonal nature of the traditional classroom in which everybody does the same thing at the same time would serve to "turn off" many non-Indian students. However, upon entering school, the Native American student faces additional cultural and linguistic barriers which, if coupled with the impersonality of the traditional educational setting, can only serve to make school a bewildering and even frightening place. The emphasis in the open classroom is upon building the curriculum to fit the needs of each individual student.

Indian values include the importance of cooperation/harmony with others. Getting along with other people is extremely impor-

tant. A person may be judged by his or her ability to work well with others as opposed to the typical non-Indian middle class orientation which stresses the acquisition of material wealth as a basis on which to judge a person's "success" in life. In the Indian view, people are valued over things. As stated earlier, the open classroom is conducive to the development of cooperative behavior. In fact, without growth in this behavior, the open classroom simply cannot function effectively.

Contrary to what many uninformed non-Indians may believe, the Indian student is competitive. One has only to look at the successes which Native American students enjoy in athletics to disprove the myth that Indians are not competitive. Yet the type of competition in a traditional classroom which singles out individuals and pits one student against another is contrary to what many Indian students are taught at home and may only serve to embarrass these students and

create negative feelings toward school and the teacher. Competition in the open classroom, on the other hand, in which the student vies with himself or herself and which encourages healthy small group competition offers a more satisfactory alternative which allows the Native American student to compete within the framework of his or her own value system.

Sharing is another core value of "Indianness." In the traditional classroom, each pupil is assigned *his or her own desk, his or her own chair, his or her own locker, his or her own textbooks*. Because of the flexible organization of equipment and materials in the open classroom, the emphasis on small group work and the organization of students in short term task forces to accomplish specific objectives, children naturally are encouraged to do a great deal of sharing not only of material things in the classroom, but sharing of themselves as well. The promoting of sharing behavior certainly follows the

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The permissiveness of the open classroom blends well with child rearing practices among many Native Americans. Children are encouraged to listen to the wisdom of their elders and to seek their counsel but also to be independent, to stand on their own two feet and make their own decisions, and to live and learn by those decisions.

"Indian way" and builds upon what the Native American child has been taught at home.

Time is very relative in the Indian perspective. Time is looked upon as a continuum, with no beginning and no end. Typically, Native Americans are not clock watchers. This does not mean that they do not care about time, rather, things are done as needed. In the open classroom, the pace is unhurried. Many short term groups are formed which work within a flexible time structure to accomplish their objectives. In addition, there is a great deal of individualized instruction which is paced by the student and which is immune to time pressures. The absence of time pressures in the open classroom fits well with the Indian view of time.

The permissiveness of the open classroom, as described earlier, blends well with child rearing practices among many Native Americans. Children are encouraged to listen to the wisdom of their elders and to seek their counsel but also to be independent, to stand on their own two feet and make their own decisions, and to live and learn by those decisions. Indian pupils are not accustomed to adults in the role of authoritarians who impose their will on others. In the open setting, the role of the teacher as a resource and guide is a more comfortable one for the Indian student who seeks the advice of adults in the home environment but is free to make his or her own decisions. The teacher is there to offer assistance when needed but he or she encourages the students to grow in

independence. This, too, is compatible with the Indian way.

Research on open education has not gained sufficient momentum or achieved sufficient depth to be definitive. One can safely say, however, that students in open schools appear to fare no worse academically than their counterparts in traditional classrooms. However, the greatest benefits to be reaped from open education appear to be in the affective domain. Social and emotional growth appear to be enhanced. Children grow in independence and responsibility. They get along better with others and there may be fewer "discipline" problems. Children get involved more readily and simply seem to enjoy school more.

A Viable Alternative

The earlier discussion of open education and Native American values should not be interpreted as all-inclusive. It is merely a beginning. Additional statements could be raised to support the contention that open education should be adopted on a widespread scale in schools serving Indian students. If it can be stated that open education is a viable alternative for *all* pupils, then certainly it can be argued that it is an even more significant alternative for the Native American student whose value system appears to fit so much better with this educational model than with a more traditional one. Yet participation in open education may be the exception rather than the rule for Indian students at all levels.

All educators are charged with the responsibility of meeting the needs of the pupils they serve. It would seem to follow, then, that educators of Indian pupils need to explore alternative patterns to better fit the needs of these students than much that has been done in the name of education in the past. The alarming failure rate of Indian students in schools, with the concomitant damage to self concept and horrendous waste of human resources must be halted. Perhaps open education can offer a partial solution to some of the problems relating to the education of Native American pupils. □

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