



THIS PAINTING IS TYPICAL OF THE
CREATIVE WORK ENCOURAGED IN OPEN
CLASSROOMS. IT IS THE WORK OF A
TWO YEAR OLD IN A VERY OPEN NURSERY
SCHOOL; HIS NAME IS EDWARD STORM SPITZBERG.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 29 THE OPEN CLASSROOM

44 Canfield Gardens
London, NW6.
England
1st September 1972.

Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017
USA

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Every summer hundreds of American teachers invade Great Britain to participate in workshops about the famous British primary school "open classrooms" and "integrated days". Most of these teachers have read Joseph Featherstone or Charles Silberman or Lillian Weber on the virtues of the physically open and relatively unstructured classroom organization which is considered to be typical of British primary schools. All are looking for the model of the primary school which will solve the problems of primary education in the United States. But they never find it, for there is no single model of the open classroom.

The label "open classroom" is used to mark a diverse range of classroom styles and techniques. Its very diversity is the open classroom's single most striking characteristic. Each group of teachers goes back to the United States with a different picture of what an open classroom is, which depends upon the particular school -- indeed the particular classrooms -- which members of the group visited and the particular lecturers to which they were exposed. Although the various propagandists for the open classroom in the United States limit their observations with statements about the variety of forms of this approach, the conventional wisdom about open classrooms now holds that there does exist a plan with some detail that can be implemented elsewhere. This conventional wisdom is quite mistaken.

All that most open classrooms -- or more appropriately the teachers in them -- have in common is a general attitude toward the educational process which is best summarised in the cant phrase "child-centered." But the detailed manifestations of this attitude in actual classroom approaches is staggeringly diverse.

During my stay in England I have visited a number of primary school classrooms which have purported to have open plan arrangement and/or integrated days. "Open plan" indicates physical arrangements which allow for the combination of groups of children in relatively

small groups at various times of the day and which also encourage relative freedom of movement of children and teachers at all times. This physical arrangement is sometimes complemented by teams of teachers instead of individual teacher responsibility; but this is not consistently the case. "Integrated day" usually suggests an arrangement which leaves choice about particular activities and experiences to the child throughout most of the day. But "integrated days" are rarely completely free form situations: in all cases I have seen the day has had a number of scheduled activities as well as blocs of relatively free time.

The diversity among the open classrooms makes generalizations about them very difficult to make. But I believe that certain similarities may emerge if I briefly describe some of these open classrooms and take some particular questions to each case. These questions need to be kept in mind both by the foreign educator who hopes to import the lessons of the British open classroom to different social and national contexts and also by the experienced open plan teacher who wants to provide an effective and enjoyable learning experience to his students. The first question is about the structure which lurks behind the seemingly non-structured educational experience of the open classroom: how does one plan and organize the informal learning situation which is characteristic of the open classroom? The second question emphasizes the importance of assessment: how does one assess the learning which is going on in an informal classroom in a manner which provides relatively objective information about the children involved without compromising the very openness of the open classroom? Finally, one must question the relationship between an open classroom arrangement and particular children: is the open classroom an appropriate learning environment for all children?

In order to answer these various questions, I shall briefly sketch some of the open classrooms I have visited and ask these questions of each experience. Then I shall reconsider the implications for these questions of all of the lessons which I have learned while observing open classrooms.

ST. NICHOLAS'S INFANT SCHOOL, LIVERPOOL.

One of the first open plan schools which I visited was an infant school (ages 5-7) in the shadow of the famous Catholic cathedral in Liverpool. St. Nicholas's Infant School is run by an imaginative and personable headmistress, Sister Audrey. The school draws children from the Irish ghetto of mid-town Liverpool, which is an industrial city. The unemployment rate in the neighborhood is rumoured to be over sixty per cent. The family background of the students is that of typical urban Irish family in England - matriarchal with little interest and participation by either parent in the educational life of the children. (Sister Audrey's account.)

Sister Audrey
explains to a
visiting HMI...



about the activities
in which the
teachers.....

and pupils are
engaged at the
St. Nicholas's
Infant School.



The building in which St. Nicholas's classes are conducted is an old Victorian structure attached to St. Nicholas's Church. Although the building is quite old -- indeed the school will be removed to new premises in two years -- the walls have been knocked out on two floors and extended learning and play spaces have been created.

I was dismayed when I entered the school by the dinginess and dirtiness of the exterior and the delapidation of the interior of the building, but I was quickly struck by the brightness and vivacity of the works of art which the children and the members of staff have produced and hung everywhere. Also I was smitten by the friendliness of the children.

Sister Audrey creates this environment by an open plan arrangement and an integrated day. There are large periods of time when the children themselves select what they want to do. But there are also scheduled periods for specialized activities: e.g., each child spends some time in a reading class with one of the four members of staff. Also, there is a daily assembly period for all.

The eighty-nine pupils are divided into groups of about twenty-five pupils arranged in family groups. Each family group contains children throughout the age range of the school. And unlike most schools run with family groupings, St. Nicholas's actually has real families in each group. Many of the biological families with children in the school are very large, so that it is not unusual for one family to have children in the school throughout the age range. And the family groupings are organized to make the most of biological relationships. At St. Nicholas's, one does not only have the benefit of older children teaching younger children, which is the usual benefit of family grouping, but one actually has the emotional support for younger siblings which older brothers and sisters can provide. Sister Audrey and the members of her staff believe that this arrangement has worked very well within the overall open classroom arrangement of the school. It appears that the family structure has helped to provide a sense of discipline in the free learning environment.

The open classrooms of St. Nicholas's must deal with the whole range of learning problems typical of urban ghettos in modern Western cities. Sister Audrey characterized the pupils in the school as being extremely dull, which indicates expectation problems on her part which is the stuff from which self-fulfilling prophecies of failure are made. But there is evidence to support this view. During the previous term the teachers had recognized the difficulty which many of the children were having with reading, so they invited Sisters from a child guidance clinic to visit the school and test the students. These child psychologists found that the range of IQs was from 60-106. Indeed only one child had an IQ above 100 and most were clustered in the 80s and 90s. Although it is likely that there was a cultural bias in the

test, the evidence does indicate learning problems for the students. So it is worthwhile to look at the school's approach to solving them within an open classroom environment.

Sister Audrey and her staff attempt to deal with the reading problems of the children through the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet -- a simplified alphabet which reduces the numbers of letters and relates the design of the sign to the actual sound of the letter in the particular word. The Initial Teaching Alphabet has been quite controversial in both England and the United States. But Sister Audrey has been quite pleased with it. And she has not found the open classroom organization of the school to be an interference in the teaching of reading; although she believes that a child cannot usually move away from the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet during the period of Infant School. So she has been dependent upon a teacher in the Junior School attached as well to St. Nicholas's Church who has had experience in helping the children move from the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet to the usual characters. But even within the constraints of the age limits, the teachers in the Infant School have been relatively successful. Sister Audrey said that ten of her current students had already successfully shifted to traditional spelling and that before the students moved on to the Junior School in the fall most of the twenty-four students would have made a successful transition to traditional spelling.

The interesting lesson to be learned from the experience with the Initial Teaching Alphabet in the open classroom is that there is a correlation here between the relatively free learning environment and the experimentation with a new approach to teaching reading. Readiness to experiment was a consistent characteristic of teachers I met who taught in open classrooms.

One of the most exciting impressions I took away from my visit to St. Nicholas's school was that even though most of these children had severe learning difficulties, they were capable of really creative work in the arts and crafts. And this impression was not unique to this open classroom; it was typical of all of the open classrooms I visited. Children at St. Nicholas's seemed to spend a lot of time in creative work and the results were always impressive: for example, one of the students was drawing a beautiful picture of the new Liverpool Cathedral and was using all sorts of bright colours to create a spectacular effect. It was obvious that the artist, even if she did have learning difficulties, was still able to do creative painting and was encouraged by her teachers to feel that she was capable of very good work. This atmosphere of encouragement was created by all of the teachers as they were helping the children in drawing and writing: they encouraged the children to feel that they could master the tasks set before them. And they had

each child select the particular task to be mastered, so the child had actively consented to each assignment.

The formal planning of activities of St. Nicholas's Infant School, with the exception of reading, seemed to be somewhat limited. And it is clear from the fact that the school had to call on a clinic for help that continuing assessment procedures in the school were rather lax. Sister Audrey indicated that there was very little in the way of formal, on-going assessment of children other than the informal consultation among teachers about their impressions of particular children.

My overall impression of St. Nicholas's is that in spite of the lack of many of the formal accoutrements of preparation which one might have expected in this difficult learning situation, the children made the most of the open classroom learning environment. It is not clear whether the open classroom offered them an alternative to their life at home, which was usually quite disciplined, or whether it simulated life at home which offered a great deal of independence to each child by leaving the child to his own devices. The important point was that in this open classroom situation the teachers were always available to help the children: when a child was "left alone" it was by his own choice; whenever he wanted help there was always a teacher at hand to give warm support and assistance. The success of this particular open plan school was the way in which the teachers balanced the need of the child for independence with his need for support -- a most important balance in a successful open classroom.

THE MICHAEL FARADAY JUNIOR SCHOOL, SOUTHWARK, LONDON

The Michael Faraday Junior School is a completely open plan junior school (ages 8-11). There are some set classroom activities, but there is a great deal of variation in student participation in set classroom subjects such as reading and maths; also there is variation in teachers as well.

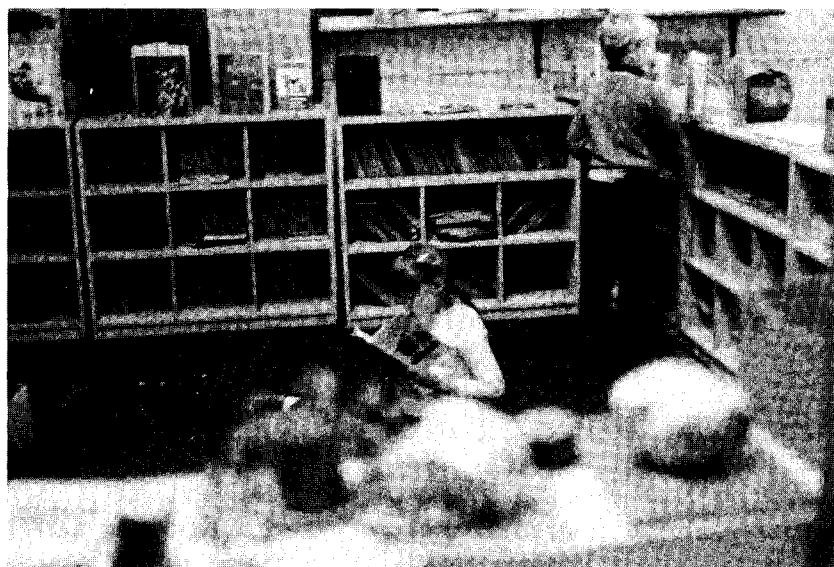
The buildings used by the school include an old Victorian building with some inner walls knocked out and a number of rooms opening off large central rooms; also there are three temporary buildings designed in a relatively open manner. The school itself, which is expanding in enrollment, will move to new premises in a few years.

The teachers in the school are organized into teams of five which assume responsibility for 125 to 150 pupils. The members of the teaching team work together and organise the curriculum in a very informal way. In the first two years of the Junior School, the course is very loosely structured: there is an emphasis on subjects such as drama, art, and movement (something like physical education in America). In the last years in the school, the formal structure is still quite limited, but there is an emphasis on the development of language skills



Miss Duffin talks to some of her pupils about the music they are playing...

while other children read on their own...



and play with hamsters and rabbits while this visiting American helps clean the cages.

and mathematics and somewhat more time devoted to organized classroom activities in small groups.

Some teachers on each team specialize: for example, one teacher would specialize in maths and another in language studies, with perhaps another specializing in remedial subjects. But these teachers switch out of their specialties year by year.

The teams devise themes for various periods of time, often open-ended, which then provide a focus for all parts of the curriculum. When I visited the school in February, 1972, the upper school was emphasizing the concept of classification by encouraging the students to indulge in various sorts of classification in all of their activities. These older pupils had been working with the theme of classification for two weeks and were going to continue with the theme for another few weeks as well. The children in the lower school were focusing on texture, and there were a number of displays which highlighted the different textures of various objects.

Miss Duffin, the headmistress of the junior school, said that the design for the operation of the school came very much from her own personal experiences as a teacher. She said that she was not importing ideas from other schools. In her own past teaching experience, which included dealing with troubled teenage girls, she found that the informal, open and free classrooms provided the best learning environment. She strongly believed that a teacher could not teach a pupil who did not want to learn.

The Faraday Junior School, according to Miss Duffin, committed a great deal of time and energy to developing reading skills in the pupils through a program which emphasized helping the children want to read. But Miss Duffin thinks that the school system in general and even her school in particular forced pupils to learn to read too early. Indeed if she had her pupils for a longer period of time, she would not force them to read as early as the Junior school years. She believes that later on, when they feel they need to read for other purposes, she could teach them much better and in a way they would enjoy more; and she was sure she could teach reading more efficiently later.

In Miss Duffin's view, the most important aspect of the open classroom learning environment is the opportunity for each pupil and teacher to develop several different personal relationships with the others. She said that some students and some teachers would never get along and others would be great buddies and work very well together. By having larger numbers of students and larger numbers of teachers interacting in the overall classroom situation, each could find his or her best learning companion.

Miss Duffin does not believe in having organized and structured materials in an open classroom. She said that in a former school where

she had been a Deputy Head the teachers had organized very structured tasks and task sequences. And even in the first year that she was at the Faraday School she and her staff had organized the curriculum in a very structured manner, although the classrooms had been run in a very open way. But she believes that these attempts at structure and organization of materials tend to be artificial and provide nothing more than "make-work" for children, which neglects the needs of each individual child. She believes that her more informal arrangement which leaves choice of activity to each child gives her and her teachers more of an opportunity to tailor the particular curriculum for each child to his specific needs.

Although Miss Duffin does not believe in having an organized and structured curriculum within the free and open environment of her open plan classrooms, she does strongly feel that teachers must spend a lot of time talking about what they intend to do with each particular child. This communication among teachers is very natural because of her organization of the teachers into teams. But the teachers in the Michael Faraday Junior School still must devote a great deal of time to planning their teaching strategies for each child and talking about particular educational problems faced by specific children.

To assist in the assessment of each child the staff of Michael Faraday has worked up assessment sheets in mathematics for each child. These sheets are very detailed and obviously are the result of fairly sophisticated knowledge both of the demands of the mathematical disciplines and of the developmental psychology of children in this age group. There are scales for recording mastery of specific mathematical operations as well as assessment points for the development of behavioural characteristics which indicate understanding of general concepts. The staff is also developing a diagnosis sheet for verbal skills.

Miss Duffin believes that the formal assessment records will only codify information about which each teacher is already aware. My conversations with individual teachers indicated that most teachers did have a clear idea about the strengths and weaknesses of particular children. But the formal assessment program will undoubtedly allow each teacher to be even more clearly aware of the development of each child and more sensitive to the goals which are encapsulated in the scales by which each child is assessed.

Another aspect of assessment worried Miss Duffin: since Michael Faraday is a Junior School, the children must take a "comparability" examination before moving on to Secondary school. This examination took the place of the infamous "eleven plus" exam, which used to label children as success or failures for the rest of their lives at age eleven. Although the comparability exam is not a test of achievement as was the eleven plus, it still has both achievement and intelligence parameters, which will govern the placement of these children in secondary school. When the children in Michael Faraday took the

comparability exam at the end of the previous academic year, they experienced a great deal of difficulty in actually sitting the test, because they had been so used to working together and cooperating in the solution of problems in their open plan learning environment. The comparability exam made each child work entirely on his own, which seemed unnatural to the child of the open classroom. The children wanted to help each other, because the rule of the open classroom in the Michael Faraday School is that when one child cannot solve a problem he goes to seek help from another.

It is clear from Miss Duffin's account of the experience of her children with the comparability exam that new sorts of testing techniques must be developed which will not compromise the cooperation which is typical of the open classroom. This search is especially pressing in regard to "external" assessment exercises which play a role in the future educational assignments of the children. Assessment techniques must recognize the differences engendered by different sorts of classroom organization.

The most difficult problem faced by the Michael Faraday School in the views of Miss Duffin and the other teachers is that of assimilating pupils from structured and formal classroom backgrounds. The Michael Faraday School was in the process of enlarging its enrollment by over 100%, so the adjustment problem was quite acute. Most of the students who attended Michael Faraday lived in new public housing which was being built around it; and most had been unsuccessful in their original schools. The students who had been successful in their home schools continued to take buses to those schools. Only those who had been previously unsuccessful came to Michael Faraday. But Miss Duffin says that most of the students are able to adjust but only after some difficulty in learning to cope with the independence and cooperation which characterize the open classrooms of Michael Faraday.

If there are difficulties in the open classroom for Miss Duffin and her teachers, they all agree that the benefits far outweigh the burdens. Miss Duffin suggested that one of the strongest points of the open classroom arrangement which she has instituted is the flexibility which she had in regard to staffing. With the team of five teachers in an open and unstructured learning environment she could use her staff in many different ways. And the teachers could organize the students in different groups for different problems and different purposes. This flexibility allowed the teachers to focus on children with problems which required remedial attention and on the "high flyers" who needed extra stimulation. It also gave the teachers an opportunity to spend more time in in-service training courses and in developing new curriculum ideas, because four people could, from time to time, cope with the work of five, as long as each knew that he would have an opportunity to pursue an individual project at some later date.

My impression of Michael Faraday Junior School is that it is a

quite dynamic place coping with difficult educational problems. The pupils seemed to be responding very well to a totally unstructured yet obviously warm learning environment. However, the school is very inward looking, which is not unusual for a school in the midst of self-conscious innovation, because the dynamics of innovation force those participating to be preoccupied with their activity. The problem with this preoccupation in an innovative institution is that the people in the school are unable to share their ideas with others and unlikely to hear the ideas of those outside of their experimental community: both attributes tend to warp the perspective of those inside the activity.

But even with the one reservation about the inward looking characteristics of the Michael Faraday School, it is clear that the open classroom as practised there has created an educational environment which is effective for those in it and which deserves further notice from those interested in open classroom techniques.

PARKWOOD PRIMARY SCHOOL, HACKNEY, LONDON

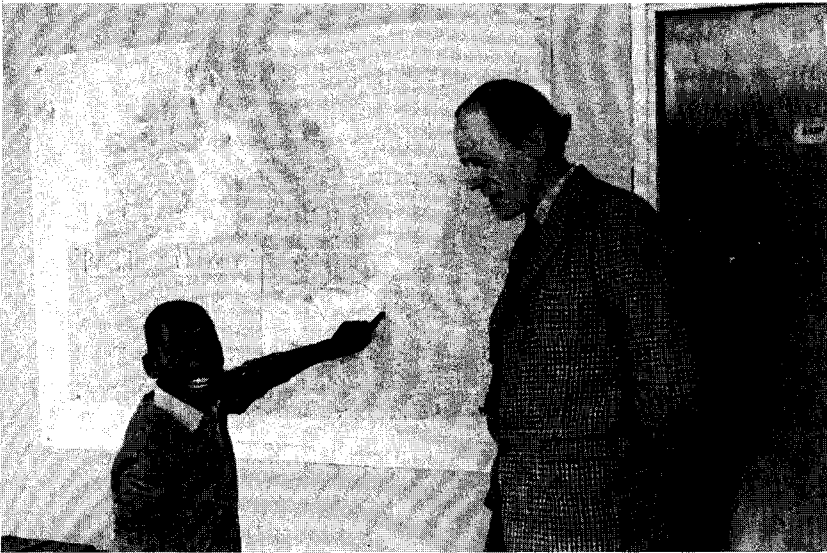
The Parkwood School is the most physically open of the open plan schools which I have visited. It is now in its third year in a modern building. The building was designed around an inner auditorium, surrounded with a number of large rooms which open onto each other and to the auditorium. The building seems to be extraordinarily flexible.

The student body of 250 children is approximately fifty per cent immigrant. The immigrant population is mainly West Indian, but there is a fair sampling of a number of other nationalities, including Cypriot, Italian, Indian and Pakistani.

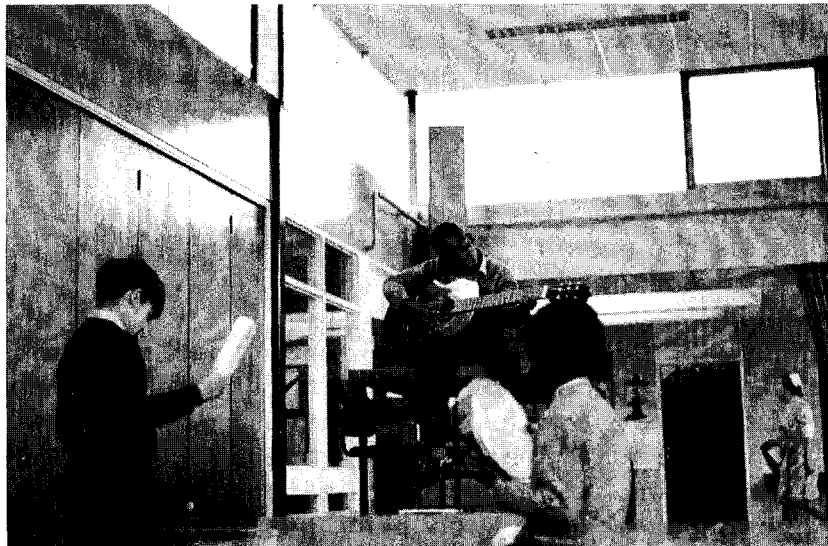
The headmaster of Parkwood, Mr. J. Brookes, first taught in secondary schools and then moved into the primary schools. He said that he had always perceived himself as being quite progressive. In his secondary school he taught through what he called a "set period," which was a form of integrated and undifferentiated day, and he used the open plan arrangement in his classroom in the primary school in which he had previously taught.

The Parkwood School has both infants and juniors, which are divided into different wings of the building, but within each division the pupils are grouped heterogeneously in modified family groups. And if a child in the infant school seems quite mature and advanced, he is moved directly into the junior school regardless of his calendar age. Some infant classes, which are concentrated on one side of the building, go over to the junior side to participate in a number of activities on a regular basis. So there is a great deal of integration of ages.

There is no formal organization of the curriculum at Parkwood. Each teacher is assigned a certain number of students, and then he is



Mr. Brookes and
one of the pupils at
the Parkwood School
talk about their
planned airplane flight..



while other
pupils hold a
musical jam
session...



and a teacher and
a small group of
students conduct
a science experiment.

responsible for the total education of that group of students. Some of the teachers design themes and projects for the week or the month for all of their classes together. But there is no formal team teaching and no team planning, and although each teacher is responsible for an identifiable group of pupils, the open plan arrangement gives the teachers and the students a great deal of flexibility.

One strong impression I had during my visit to this school was that the pupils were receiving a great deal of individual tuition from the teachers. And I found that it was the policy at the school that at some point in the week each child would get individual and personalized instruction in a number of different subject areas. Also, small group activities are organized on a continuing and regular basis. This attention to individuals and small groups is possible because the open plan organization allows each child to pursue his own interests and projects; so while most of the children are following their own projects, the teacher can concentrate on the problems of a few at a time.

While I was in the school one teacher had a group of his students working on a science experiment and the design of a graph to reproduce the results of that experiment. The other students in his class were busy pursuing other activities such as drawing and playing musical instruments. The interest in music in this school was especially impressive: I was struck by the variety of musical instruments available in the school and the number of pupils who spontaneously took advantage of the opportunity to play them.

Although there is no formal team teaching or specialization among teachers in the school, there is a great deal of consultation and sharing among teachers. And each teacher works with the others in a manner that emphasizes his or her special talents -- for example, there is one teacher who is especially talented in music, and she taught all of the other teachers how to play the guitar and gave pointers to the others about how music lessons could be integrated into other activities.

A number of students have language problems in the school and every term there are a few entrants who do not speak any English whatsoever. The school's approach to the teaching and learning of English for those who speak another language is unique among schools I have seen: the teacher assigns an older student to the younger student who cannot speak the language, and this older "brother" or "sister" helps the new pupil to master the rudiments of English as a learning assignment for the older child. The teacher then undertakes formal instruction as well, but the staff has found that the non-English speaking child learns more from his pupil tutor. Mr. Brookes says that the results of this particular teaching exercise have been spectacular. Within a couple of terms most children are quite able to communicate at a very respectable level.

Each term the school adopts a major project for all of the children. The term's project during my visit dealt with aviation and airplanes. The children and staff were preparing to take a flight on a BAC 111 some time before the end of the academic year. A number of activities were leading up to this event. The children were regularly following television and radio broadcasts about airplanes, and they were preparing reports about flying experiences they had seen, read about, or enjoyed themselves. This school-wide project created a focus of attention and a sense of identity for all of those -- both students and staff -- in the school. And it seemed to generate a great deal of excitement and learning during my visit to the school.

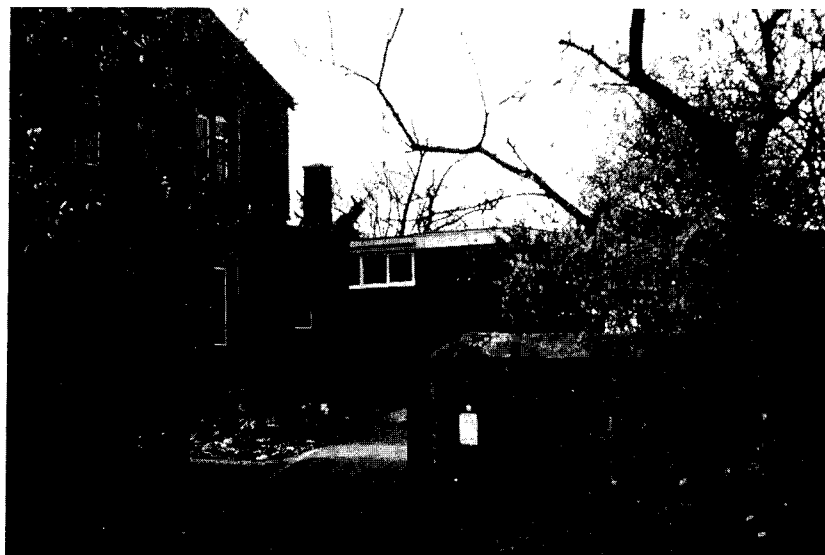
The results of Parkwood's open classrooms are very difficult to assess, first because the school is only two years old. In the two entries to secondary school, the results of the children on the comparability tests were at or about the norm of London as a whole. These results are a significant achievement in this particular area of London, because of the language problems faced in the local immigrant communities.

Second, it is difficult to make judgments about the overall performance of the school, because internal assessment procedures are almost non-existent at the school. Mr. Brookes does not have and does not ask for a formal assessment report about the pupils from his teachers. The assessment is strictly informal and impressionistic. This situation is a weakness which Mr. Brookes himself recognizes.

My impression of the Parkwood School is that its open learning environment has created an effective educational program for children from diverse backgrounds, many of whom would be called educationally deprived and who would not be performing as well in the typical school in London or a major city in the United States. The fact that learning seemed exciting and fun in an urban neighborhood suffering from all of the ills of the world's cities is itself a testament to the open classrooms provided by Mr. Brookes and his colleagues.

EAST KENNETT SCHOOL, WILTSHIRE

East Kennett School is the proverbial country school, tucked into the downs of Southern England: there are two teachers and three plus a fraction classrooms. The building itself is a little box-like arrangement where the two rooms can be opened onto each other and, in addition, there is another section divided into a rest room, a cooking area, and an office for the Headmistress, Mrs. Audrey Tomlin, who is also one of the two teachers. This building has recently replaced a nineteenth century school house. Next door is a little house which is now being converted into the Headmistress's cottage.



In this small
Wiltshire schoolhouse
behind the Headmistress's
cottage,...

Mrs. Tomlin
listens intently
as her pupils
respond to her
remarks about
tradition...



and then is
surrounded by
them as they
prepare for the
day's work which
seems to be play
for most of them.

Mrs. Tomlin, the headmistress, came to East Kennett from a job as a Deputy Headmistress of a large comprehensive secondary school near Swindon, a growing industrial town not far from East Kennett. She said she wanted to head a village school because she felt that it was only in such a context that meaningful education could be accomplished.

Although small the school is quite diverse: it is divided into two classes, an infant side with children from four through seven; and a junior side with children from seven through eleven. Also there is a great diversity in socio-economic background among the children, which ranges from parents who are farm laborers to parents who are members of the landed gentry.

Mrs. Tomlin runs her school on an open classroom basis, because she believes that such an organization contributes to "the greater mental health" of the children. She believes that the children do enough structured academic work to keep up with their peers in traditional classrooms, but that the open plan arrangement with its emphasis on individual choice and responsibility is much better for the overall development of the children's "character" than the traditional, formal, structured curriculum.

She was especially proud of the creative art work done by the children in the plastic arts, painting, and writing. She said that the freedom of the children contributed to their creativity. And I must say that the work appeared quite imaginative to me.

The two teachers in East Kennett emphasized the importance of the children acting independently for themselves, because this was the way they would have to act in later life. An example of this attitude was that whenever a child wanted to sharpen a pencil, he always got up and did it for himself without asking permission or help. This was true of even the youngest child. And whenever a child wanted a book, he went and got it for himself. It seems extraordinary to characterize this situation as extraordinary; but when compared with the trivial rules and norms of dependence in traditional primary school classrooms, this is a matter worthy of note.

The diversity of ages in the classes, which were by necessity family groupings, created a great deal of work for the teachers in preparing materials for each individual child. Mrs. Tomlin showed me the materials which she prepared every day for each child. There was a separate stack for each pupil, which indicated a great deal of thought, planning, and hard work on her part. But this prepared material did not impose a set regimen on each child. When the child actually approached his stack of materials, there was always a great deal of choice in subject matter for him and he dealt with the problems set in the materials at his own pace and when he wanted to. So the combination of structure and openness at East Kennett is quite impressive.

Although problem setting materials were prepared by the teacher, each child created his own record book for his work. This self-made book was the central learning record of each child and also an ever-growing and visible testament to what the child had actually done for himself. As a system of self-fulfillment and self-assessment, the creation of this book was an important learning tool.

In addition to the book which each child created for himself, Mrs. Tomlin kept detailed records in order to monitor individual performance. She said that these records were crucial in providing the appropriate education for the individual child in a group of children with mixed ability, age, and background. It is clear that Mrs. Tomlin carefully planned the education for each particular child.

Mrs. Tomlin believes strongly that the village school, with its small size and heterogeneous student body is the best possible setting for education. She says that the ideal sort of relationship of one to one between teacher and student is still possible in a village school. And she feels that she is implementing this ideal in East Kennett.

Also, Mrs. Tomlin believes that a village provides a perfect learning environment for children. She uses the village as an important educational resource. When I first arrived at East Kennett, the children were in a combined open assembly. Mrs. Tomlin was talking about May Day (it was May 1st) and the traditions and practices of May Day in the villages in the area. She related this account of May Day with its songs, dances and Maypole, to a conception of heritage and tradition which she felt was important. She compared May Day as an example of keeping up a tradition with other sorts of occasions and ceremonies which the children volunteered such as Christmas and birthdays. She told the pupils that it was important to East Kennett for the children to help bring the culture and heritage which May Day represented to life again: in future years she hoped to organize a Maypole and various other celebrations for the whole village. All of this she said through a conversation with the children which involved them in her enthusiasm for the particular occasion of May Day and the general concepts of tradition and heritage.

Mrs. Tomlin also attempted to enhance the relationship between the school and the village by integrating the parents into the school's activities. The day I visited the school she had invited a number of mothers and fathers to help her prepare the class for a formal photograph which a friend of hers was going to take. While the parents were there she encouraged them to talk with the children and admire their work in order to encourage them in the school environment.

All in all I must say that this small country school provided an example of the open classroom and its virtues which equals any others that I have seen. And Mrs. Tomlin's example suggests that a truly open classroom is open not only for the students but also to the community from which the children come.

WALWORTH COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL, SOUTHWARK, LONDON

The final example of an open classroom learning situation which I would like to consider is not a primary school classroom at all but a set of classrooms in the lower forms (grades) of a large comprehensive secondary school in a working class area of London, the Walworth School. The lower forms of this school are located in an old building -- built about 1910-20 -- which is typical of London schools of the period: it has three floors, each with a spacious hall. The rooms opening off the big halls are all relatively similar in size. However, there are a number of smaller rooms which were probably cloak rooms that are tucked away in various nooks and crannies.

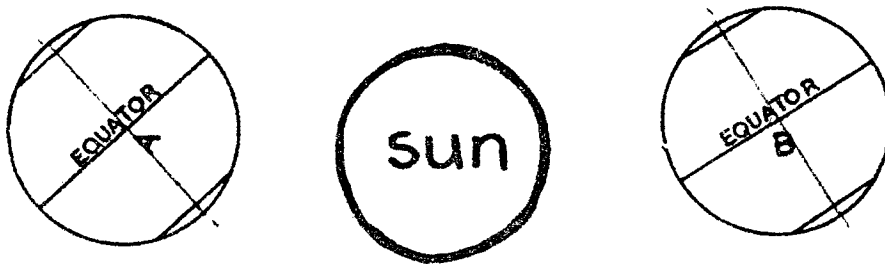
The head of the lower school, Mr. Price, has imaginatively had this old building modified to "open it up." All of the cloakrooms have been turned into working areas for students and staff, and many of the classrooms have been redone with walls knocked down and large doors built in between them as well as off the halls. The most imaginative reconstruction has been done on a floor used by an integrated English-History-Geography course (called a "humanities course") for first and second year students in the school; it is this course which provides the example of an open and integrated classroom at the secondary level. The physical arrangements remind one of most of the open plan primary schools: the walls have been knocked out of some of the classrooms which lead off the hall and also doors have been knocked out between classrooms around an enlarged central hall. The hall itself has been carpeted. Part of the enlarged area is used as a library for the whole lower school. The rest of the area is used as a resource center for the integrated humanities course. There are booths for private study for individual students in this large area, and also a sector for individual viewing of slides and an area for television viewing. The classrooms opening off the large area are furnished with tables and chairs, not desks. And the various rooms seem to be quite flexible in use. Also, there are a couple of traditional classrooms and staff and storage rooms.

The integrated humanities course is an exercise in the integration of related subject disciplines and the opening of large blocks of classroom time for relatively unstructured learning experiences at the secondary level. The course uses a historical sequence focusing on the problems of man and his evolutionary development as an integrating technique. Each week's work is keyed to a particular era of man's development. When I visited the topic under consideration was pre-historical (and even pre-man): the Ice Age.

Each week the staff -- a team of teachers drawn from the contributing disciplines -- prepares a work unit which raises questions about the period under study. The teaching sequence features a lecture on Mondays, with follow-up periods of discussion of the subject of the lecture in smaller groups thereafter. Then as the week progresses a

A PAGE FROM ONE OF THE WORKSHEETS USED
BY THE HUMANITIES COURSE AT THE WALWORTH SCHOOL

THE FROZEN LANDS I.



The diagram shows the position of the Earth in June and in December. Write in the correct month under the diagram.

Explain why the lands near the poles have long dark winters when the Sun never shines.

Why can the sun be seen for 24 hrs. a day in June at the North Pole?

1/5/1

number of audio visual and alternative individual study projects are keyed to the subject area. Each student chooses his own projects for the week.

Occasionally English is taught apart from the subject area under discussion. However the teachers participating in the program hope to integrate English more completely into the course as time goes on.

There is no text for the integrated humanities course. Nor is there any systematic use of large chunks of outside integrating materials. Instead the staff systematically prepares integrated materials using books, audio visual aids, and other resources appropriate to the particular topic of the week.

Here, as in the East Kennett School, each student is encouraged to keep a notebook. These notebooks themselves serve as texts for the class. Also work sheets are developed by the staff for various books and materials. As these work sheets are completed they are added to the books by the individual students. These workbooks can be quite impressive documents. Even the weaker students obviously take pride in the preparation of their workbooks.

During my visit to the Walworth School there was a relatively high noise level in the study areas; but it was quite obvious that each student was pursuing his own individual project or participating in a cooperative exercise. At the time there were two teachers who were dealing with students working independently in the open areas. Also, one teacher was working with a group of students in one of the classrooms opening off the integrated area, and another was leading an English class not at all related to the problems of the Ice Age. A part-time teacher was helping two students in the integrated course who were having learning difficulties.

In the workroom where the teachers confer there is a list on the board which states the various criteria which can be used for evaluating the performance of the children in the course. And members of staff say that they are now trying to develop information for each subject unit which relates behavioural performance by the children to particular objectives of work. It is ironic but impressive to find in this integrated and open course a blend of the free and the Bloomian behavioralist approach to curriculum development.

Mr. Price, who was the driving force behind this integrated humanities course, evaluated its overall impact quite positively. But he did have one reservation. He said that he and the other members of staff were having problems challenging the stronger students. They used the stronger students to help the weaker students, but he was afraid that they were not giving enough challenge to, and I use his word, the "supercharged" student. The problem of challenging the high

flyer is not unique to the open classroom at the secondary level: but it seems to matter more at the Walworth School, which is an indication that a solution may be found.

This integrated studies course, as all open classroom experiments, demands a great deal of time from the staff, who must develop new materials as a team. They do not operate as individual specialists each teaching his own speciality; instead they all cooperate in preparing the material. And they all teach all of the material, which demands their participation in a challenging self-education experience. This divorce from speciality is not unusual in primary schools, but it is still a rare event at the secondary level.

The lesson which the outside observer can learn from the experiences of the Walworth School in its integrated humanities course is that older students can profit just as much from an open classroom arrangement with large blocks of free time as younger pupils in infant and junior schools. And from observation of the Walworth School it does not appear that subteens and teenagers create any more disciplinary problems in a freer learning environment than do primary pupils; and they may even be better behaved (whatever that means) than their disciplined peers in traditional classrooms.

The Walworth integrated humanities course provides a model for secondary organization of the classroom and also for the integration of disciplines in an interesting and challenging format.¹

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1. I should briefly note that the Walworth course does not solve the most difficult problem of integrated courses at the secondary level: providing a coherent understanding of particular subject matter without losing insight into the unique approaches to organizing knowledge which disciplines provide. But it seems to me that a relatively simple addition to the overall design of the Walworth course would provide a sense of the various disciplines which the present exercise of integration may have lost: a bloc of time each week devoted to each discipline in consecutive sessions where the distinctive approach of the discipline is the subject for discussion. The methodological insights of each discipline could easily be related to an understanding of the particular theme of the week. Critics of integrated courses often bemoan the prostitution of disciplines which such courses create. The Walworth course could protect itself from this criticism and at the same time improve its educational value with only this minor change. The balance between coherence and disciplinary insight needs just a slight alteration in the Walworth course which a discussion of the methods of history, geography, and English could provide; and the coherence need not be lost, because the methodological analysis should be clearly related to the unit of the week so

CONCLUSIONS

After this brief tour of a variety of open classrooms in England, it is worthwhile to return to the three questions with which I introduced the idea of the open classroom, because the various schools provide the beginnings of some answers to them.

The first question was, in essence: how much structure ought one attempt to impose on an "open" classroom? One cannot clearly infer a single answer from the experiences. The variety of different approaches to structure within the general context of an open classroom ranged from Miss Duffin's no structure whatsoever at Michael Faraday to Mrs. Tomlin's detailed though non-coercive and choice-extensive organization of a particular curriculum for a specific child in East Kennett. I must say that I believe Mrs. Tomlin's approach to be superior to that of Miss Duffin's on this point. The preparation of materials organized with the particular child in mind but presented to the child in a manner which emphasizes a range of alternatives and which leaves to the child the decisions about time and pace for mastery makes the openness of the classroom fulfill its most important developmental objective without sacrificing educational content. And the needs of the individual student are carefully considered in the design of the alternatives offered to him. This approach may in some measure compromise the theoretical freedom of the child in the classroom, but the actual compromise is limited and the dividend in terms of appropriateness of material and probable success of mastery would seem to me to be improved greatly.

The second question was about the role of assessment in the open classroom. You will recall that Miss Duffin thought that the external examinations which primary school children take in the British school system -- and in reality in every modern school system at every level -- tend to subvert the cooperative spirit of the open classroom. In her estimate and in mine, it is important that modes of assessment be developed which are not so different in spirit and procedure from the day to day life of the usual open classroom, so that the shock of difference does not destroy the actual performance of the children. The value of any assessment instrument is only that of informing the teacher and the child about how well the child is learning on a number of different scales. All of the open classroom teachers with whom I spoke understood the importance of assessment as part of the on-going operation of the open classroom, because of the importance of tailoring the curriculum to the needs of each individual student. But if the external exams are too rigid, the variety of assessment techniques used in the classrooms themselves were so diverse and sometimes so informal as to be of questionable objective diagnostic value. In contrast, the assessment instruments developed by Miss Duffin for the children in her school seemed to be quite useful and unusually formal for an open class-

1 cont'd

.. that it does not become an arid exercise.

room and especially Miss Duffin's open classrooms. Also, the student work-text books which Mrs. Tomlin at East Kennett and Mr. Price at Walworth used in their open classrooms seemed to be especially good assessment media and of course were effective learning experiences in and of themselves -- the perfect combination of educational virtues.

My own observations have convinced me that the most crucial condition for the success of the open classroom as a learning experience for the children is the availability of sensitive assessment techniques which allow the teacher and the pupil to have up-to-date information available about the pupil's performance and problems. This information about pupil progress must be understandable to the teacher, to other professionals who come into the classrooms - such as inspectors and visiting Americans - to parents, and, most important, to the children themselves. The role which assessment can play in the open classroom is still very underdeveloped. Assessment suffers from its reputation in the traditional classroom of being a grading exercise divorced from experience which serves only to encourage self-destructive competition among the students. Whereas assessment in the open classroom ought to be that appropriate to a more ideal educational environment: a tool for improving the learning experience of each individual pupil.

My third question was whether or not all children can benefit from an open classroom experience? My observations do not give an adequate sample on which to base any clear suggestions about an answer. Both Miss Duffin and Mr. Price expressed some hesitation about whether the open classroom provided adequate stimulation to the "high flyer," and I have known children who have come from upper middle class family backgrounds and who have obvious academic ability, who have been under-achievers in open classroom environments and who, when transferred to traditional (though private, not state) schools, have performed at the top of their classes.

My impression is that the open classroom at its best ought to be an appropriate learning environment for both the slow learner and the academically talented student. But perhaps because of the nature of the sort of people who are attracted into open classroom teaching, greater attention is being paid to the problems of the slow learner, suprising though this may be in this least best of all possible worlds; this reverse discrimination may be at the expense of enriching the learning environment of the higher achiever. But I offer this suggested explanation quite cautiously; and even if my observation is correct, I doubt that there will be any serious long term consequences of this particular trend. Indeed its benefits would far outweigh its negative impact.

Although there are always major problems faced by certain children in adjusting to the independence which is part and parcel of the open classroom experience, most teachers who have taught in this environment seem to think that there is not a single child who cannot adjust to it

if he is given appropriate encouragement -- encouragement in school and encouragement at home. My guess is that many of the children who supposedly cannot adjust are those whose parents are skeptical about the open classroom from the beginning. And many of these children come from upper middle class families which tend to produce the upper halves of most academic groups, thereby adding to the impression that open classrooms cheat "high-flyers."

Having said that the open classroom situation is probably appropriate for most children and that it can, through its flexibility and its emphasis on individual needs, deal with the problems of the high flyer as well as the under achiever, I must say that there are differences in learning styles appropriate to different children even within very similar communities. Therefore I consider it to be crucial that alternatives in learning environments be maintained. No matter how attractive the open classroom situation may be, there will always be children and parents who feel more comfortable in a structured learning environment. Therefore the traditional classroom ought to be made available for them, because they are more likely to learn better in such a situation. It is crucial that the theory of the open classroom -- that children should have alternatives and not be forced to adapt themselves to a single, homogeneous learning environment -- should inform the overall educational system: the open school system must provide institutional choices for all of those who participate in it.

As you can tell from what I have said, I am a very strong supporter of the open classroom system. The open classroom is open not only in terms of its provision for pupils but also in its provision of alternatives for teachers in different ways to organize it. And it is this very diversity of classroom approaches which falls under the label of open classroom that makes it so difficult to pin down and yet so attractive.

The important lesson which I think the foreign observer can learn from the British experience is that it represents the attempt of thoughtful and innovative British teachers -- especially primary teachers and infant headmasters and mistresses -- to deal with the learning problems which they actually confront when they face their pupils. Each teacher has developed for himself a subtly different open classroom from all others. It is this spirit of taking a concept that is "in the air" and then adapting and adopting it for the particular learning problems of a given group of children that is the important spirit which must illuminate the attempt to implement the open classroom in other cultures. For the open classroom to be appropriate in other

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2. The importance of the head in this innovation is due to the almost dictatorial power given to the head by British educational law and practice.

countries and other social contexts it is important that its implementation be tailored to the social, economic, cultural, community, and age characteristics of the children involved. The openness of the classroom must reflect the openness of those who design it and those who implement it to continuing criticism of their experiment and also reflect their willingness to change.

Most of the problems and some of the achievements of British education in the last few years have been blamed on or credited to the explosion of open classrooms throughout British primary education. There is supposed to have been a marked improvement³ in the creativity of children coming out of English primary schools. There is supposed to have been, if not a deterioration, at least no improvement in the⁴ reading ability of children in British schools in the past decade. Both results have been ascribed to the open classroom. But I doubt that either or any of the problems or achievements can be causally connected with the open classroom movement. However, in so far as achievements have grown out of the open classroom environment, it is important to know what has been at work in the open classrooms where there have been good results so that the best practices can be implemented elsewhere. And insofar as the open classroom may have contributed to educational problems -- perhaps to the reading plateau -- then it is crucial to learn how the open plan might be modified to maintain its benefits without creating educational burdens. Since the open classrooms are open not only to pupils but also to observers, it is necessary that as much hard information about what goes on in them be developed as is possible, for it is only by developing strong empirical evidence about the nature and effectiveness of the practices in the open classroom that one can maintain and enhance the openness and effectiveness of the educational experience there. Since this educational research is so important to the practice of education in the open classroom, I would hope that teachers themselves would generate their own research procedures and undertake the collection and dissemination of their results so that all others can share their insights. Too little of this research "on the ground" presently occurs; perhaps once the novelty has worn off, the flexibility of the open classroom for teachers will allow them to collect the hard data all of them need for pedagogical success.

3. Comments of local authority advisers and HMIS.

4. NFER research results. TES p.3. 24.3.72.

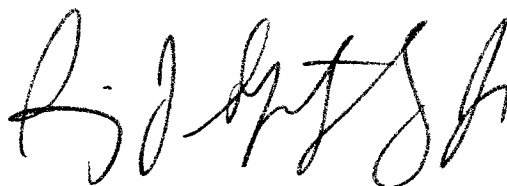


VIEWS OF OPEN CLASSROOMS IN WILTSHIRE AND LONDON.

My own general conclusion is that all conclusions about the present effectiveness and future possibilities of the open classroom must be quite tentative. In spite of the open and child-centered learning approach's theoretical pedigree - from Rousseau through Dewey - and its rich history, the lessons of extensive experiences are yet to be clearly offered.

We must be careful not to let out conclusions about the open classroom be preordained by a priori ideological positions. Commitment to the open classroom is very much a matter of moral values: but its educational viability is a question of hard facts. Both must be regularly tested and always at issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'I. J. Spitzberg, Jr.', with a stylized, cursive script.

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

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