

# READING REST TOP



# THE OPEN CLASSROOM

LIKE AUTOMOTIVE MODELS, WOMEN'S hemlines, and children's toys, pedagogical fads come and go, causing an immediate stir but rarely influencing teaching practice in any significant way. The notion that every innovation dreamed up by reformers inside and outside public schools makes its way into the nation's classrooms is popular among those hunting for reasons to malign the schools. But it is crucial to distinguish between mere intellectual chatter and ideas that provoke substantive change.

Where on this spectrum does the idea of the "open classroom" lie? At first glance, it would seem to be just another fad. It burst onto the American education scene in the late 1960s, only to fade away by the late 1970s. Appearances, however, can be deceiving.

## British Invasion

The open-classroom movement originated in British public elementary schools after World War II. The movement, known then as informal education, spread slowly to the United States. In 1967 a parliamentary commission headed by Lady Bridget Plowden published a report, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, that promoted open education in all British schools. American educators who visited British schools during the late 1960s had read the Plowden report and visited classrooms where informal education dominated teaching and learning. They viewed informal education—or, as they came to call it, open classrooms or open education—as an answer to both the American education

PHOTOGRAPH BY CORBIS

Schools without walls

became all the rage

during the early 1970s.

Were they just another fad?

system's critics and the problems of U.S. society.

For more than a decade, U.S. schools had been subjected to withering attacks, blamed for everything from the launch of Sputnik to urban decay. They were faulted for not developing enough engineers and scientists; for being racially segregated and hostile to disadvantaged children; and for producing uncreative graduates who seldom questioned authority. Critics thought that the schools could be the vehicle for winning the Cold War, furthering the civil rights struggle, and roiling a 1950s culture of conformity that suffocated imagination.

Open classrooms' focus on students' "learning by doing" resonated with those who believed that America's formal, teacher-led classrooms were crushing students' creativity. In that sense the open-classroom

by LARRY CUBAN

## THESE ENDURING pedagogical quarrels are proxies for

movement mirrored the social, political, and cultural changes of the 1960s and early 1970s. The era saw the rise of a youth-oriented counterculture and various political and social movements—the civil-rights movement, antiwar protests, feminist and environmental activism—that questioned traditional seats of authority, including the way classrooms and schools were organized and students were taught.

In both Britain and the United States, open classrooms contained no whole-class lessons, no standardized tests, and no detailed curriculum. The best of the open classrooms had planned settings where children came in contact with things, books, and one another at “interest centers” and learned at their own pace with the help of the teacher. Teachers structured the classroom and activities for individual students and small work groups. They helped students negotiate each of the reading, math, science, art, and other interest centers on the principle that children learn best when they are interested and see the importance of what they are doing.

Consider the scene from a 3rd-grade open classroom in a New York City elementary school described by two proponents, Walter and Miriam Schneir, in a 1971 *New York Times Magazine* article:

What is most striking is that there are no desks for pupils or teachers. Instead, the room is arranged as a workshop.

Carelessly draped over the seat, arm, and back of a big old easy chair are three children, each reading to himself. Several other children nearby sprawl comfortably on a covered mattress on the floor, rehearsing a song they have written and copied into a song folio. One grouping of tables is a science area with . . . magnets, mirrors, a prism, magnifying glasses, a microscope. . . . Several other tables placed together and surrounded by chairs hold a great variety of math materials such as “geo blocks,” combination locks, and Cuisenaire rods, rulers, and graph paper. . . . The teacher sits down at a small round table for a few minutes with two boys, and they work together on vocabulary with word cards. . . . Children move in and out of the classroom constantly.

### Schools without Walls

As the idea of open education gained momentum, thousands of elementary-school classrooms became home-like settings where young children moved from one attractive learning center for math to another for art. Additional learning centers engaged them in science, reading, and writing lessons. Teams of teachers worked with multiage groups of students

and created elementary schools where children were no longer assigned to grade levels. Some school districts started alternative open education programs at the high-school level and gave teachers discretion to create new academic courses where students directed their own learning, worked in the community, and pursued intellectual interests. At both the elementary and secondary levels, open education meant teachers were acting more as coaches in helping students than as bosses directing children in every activity.

Avid promoters of open education commissioned architects to build schools without walls. Teams of teachers worked collaboratively with one another, using movable dividers to reconfigure the open space for large- and small-group projects and individual study.

By the early 1970s, the phrase open classrooms dominated educators’ vocabularies. Even though parents and practitioners found it hard to pin down exactly what open education meant, many school boards adopted open-education programs, and open-space schools were built across the country. Few superintendents or principals could risk saying aloud that they had neither heard of the innovation nor found it desirable without risking sneers from peers or criticism from bosses.

So many schools were adopting the physical attributes of open classrooms that some advocates wondered whether the spirit of informal education was truly being followed. In his 1973 book *The Open Classroom Reader*, Charles Silberman warned enthusiastic teachers and parents:

By itself, dividing a classroom into interest areas does not constitute open education; creating large open spaces does not constitute open education; individualizing instruction does not constitute open education. . . . For the open classroom . . . is not a model or set of techniques, it is an approach to teaching and learning. The artifacts of the open classroom—interest areas, concrete materials, wall displays—are not ends in themselves but rather means to other ends. . . . In addition, open classrooms are organized to encourage:

- ◆ Active learning rather than passive learning;
- ◆ Learning and expression in a variety of media, rather than just pencil and paper and the spoken word;
- ◆ Self-directed, student-initiated learning more than teacher-directed learning.

### Backlash

Just a few years later, however, the ground shifted. In the mid-1970s, with the economy stagnating and the nation deeply divided over the Vietnam War, critics again trained their sights

## deeper political divisions between conservatives and liberals.

on the public schools. The national crisis gave rise to a perception, amplified by the media, that academic standards had slipped, that the desegregation movement had failed, and that urban schools were becoming violent places. This time the call was not for open education but for a return to the basics, again mirroring general social trends—namely, the conservative backlash against the cultural and political changes of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Traditional schools sprang up in suburbs and cities. Open-space schools rebuilt their walls. States tried to raise academic standards by developing minimum competency tests that high-school students had to pass in order to receive a diploma. Citations in the media and academic journals indicate that interest in open classrooms peaked somewhere around 1974. By the early 1980s, open classrooms had already become a footnote in doctoral dissertations.

But were open classrooms just another fad? Perhaps in the sense that, like hula hoops and pet rocks, they had soared onto the scene and then disappeared without a trace. Considering them merely a fad, however, would miss the deeper meaning of open classrooms as yet another skirmish in the ideological wars that have split educators and the public since the first tax-supported schools opened their doors in the early 1800s.

### The School Wars

For at least two centuries, competing traditions of teaching reading, math, citizenship, and morality have fired policy debates and occasionally touched classroom practices. In teacher-centered instruction, knowledge is often (but not always) “presented” to a learner (via lectures, textbooks, and testing) who is—and the metaphors vary—a “blank slate” or a “vessel to fill.” In student-centered instruction, by contrast, knowledge is often (but not always) “discovered” by the learner (via individual and small-group work, projects blending different subjects and skills, and inquiry and questioning), who may be described as “rich clay in the hands of an artist” or “a flourishing garden in need of a masterful cultivator.” On the whole, different forms of teacher-centered instruction have dominated U.S. classrooms for the past century.

However, major challenges to teacher-centered instruction were mounted at the beginning of the 20th century by “pedagogical progressives,” to use Lawrence Cremin’s apt phrase; in the 1960s by enthusiasts for open education; and again in the late 1980s and early 1990s by neoprogressives committed to integrated curricula, performance-based assessments (rather than standardized tests), and smaller schools. Nevertheless, a wide gap remained between ideas and actual practice. Among educators, mainstream classroom practices remained teacher-centered, even if substantial numbers of teachers—

trained by progressive faculty members—grasped pieces of the student-centered tradition and created hybrid practices.

The present moment in American education, with its emphasis on standards-based curricula and test-based accountability, surely favors the teacher-centered crowd. Nevertheless, many teachers, particularly in elementary schools, continue to prize active student involvement, cross-disciplinary projects completed by small groups, and similar activities. And even full-fledged open education is still thriving in schools across the country, from the Los Angeles Open Charter School to the Irwin Avenue Open Elementary in North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district. Many teachers and principals still embrace the principles of open education, but keep their heads low to avoid incoming fire.

In high schools, most teachers continue to use teacher-centered practices, leavened slightly by informal practices that have crept into their repertoires. Yet activists in the small-schools movement carry the torch of open education and progressive practices from earlier generations.

Why this long-running ideological war over the best ways to teach reading, math, civic engagement, and character building? The short answer is that these enduring pedagogical quarrels are proxies for deeper political divisions between conservatives and liberals on issues ranging from environmental protection to foreign policy. There are, of course, liberals who believe in traditional education and conservatives who embrace progressive ideas, but the lines are fairly well drawn.

So while the open classroom has clearly disappeared from the vocabulary of educators, another variation of open education is likely to reappear in the years ahead. Deep-seated progressive and traditional beliefs about rearing children, classroom teaching and learning, and the values and knowledge that should be instilled in the next generation will continue to reappear because schools historically have been battlegrounds for solving national problems and working out differences in values.

Since children differ in their motivations, interests, and backgrounds, and learn at different speeds in different subjects, there will never be a victory for either traditional or progressive teaching and learning. The fact is that no single best way for teachers to teach and for children to learn can fit all situations. Both traditional and progressive ways of teaching and learning need to be part of a school’s approach to children. Smart teachers and principals have carefully constructed hybrid classrooms and schools that reflect the diversities of children. Alas, that lesson remains to be learned by the policymakers, educators, and parents of each generation.

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