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ABSTRACT

The educational idealogy and administration of the person-oriented English Infant School and the object-oriented traditional American primary school are contrasted in this paper. The English Infant School movement is a contemporary model of open education. Development of opern educational systems in America should emphasize transfer of the spirit of the English Infant School, rather than its physical attributes alone. Direct importation is questionable, for English Infant Schools have developed as a unique reflection of English society and child welfare concerns. Attempts to develop open educational opportunities here should be teacher-oriented. Rather than imposing an outside model on teachers, the model should be provided and teachers helped to understand it. Teachers who accept the model should be given support and resources to help them develop open classrooms. This support involves not only specific techniques, but reinforcement of teacher's belief in the child and in the autonomy of the classroom as a legitimate goal. An increasing polarization of educational systems in this country to serve different segments of society is seen as a trend in the future. (NH)

EXTENDING OPEN EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Each person at this Conference is concerned with the development of open educational systems in the United States, a concern that binds us together as a group. It is hoped that this Conference will lead participants towards a conceptualization of strategies for the dissemination of this educational idea. A number of questions must be raised at this point. Can we take the English Infant School and superimpose it on the American school system? Are there lessons that we can learn from the English experience? Can we revive the American Progressive movement once again? Are there lessons that we can learn from the American Progressive experience?

A number of educators today are attempting to use some of the strategies of the English Infant School in American primary classes. Family grouping, the practice of placing children ages five through seven together in a single class is a characteristic of many English Infant Schools. The practice is closely akin to the nongraded elementary school or to interage groupings found in some American schools for many years.

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What has been the results of these attempts to do away with age grading? In some cases it has led to grouping children by criteria other than age. Intelligence test scores or reading achievement may be used in place of chronological age as a criterion for] ·g children into classes. The lock step approach to primary educatio· is not changed in any significant way by the use of these different criteria.

In other cases non-grading has led to educational reform by accomodating children into the existing system. In a graded approach most children "fit" into the existing educational structure. They can more or less meet the expectancies of the teacher. Unfortunately, the very bright and the very dull are not easily accommodated. Nongrading can help these children find a better niche in the system taking pressures off of both children and the system and thereby actually strengthening the system by making its more inappropriate elements less troublesome and therefore less noticeable.

The English Infant School class is spacially organized into activity centers. It might be possible to help American primary teachers organize their classroom space in the same way. Such a classroom organization would better support an activity oriented curriculum than the present organization of most primary classrooms with its rows or groupings of desks. Materials would be accessible and children could move through assigned learning tasks at their own pace, changing areas as they changed learning tasks.

Several primary teachers that I know have added activity centers to their classrooms. Some have complained that these centers take up too much space, crowding the individual children's desks. Others feel that children working in activity centers are too noisy to allow the teacher to continue to be involved in the more serious work of the class, generally the teaching of reading to groups of children. Interest or activity centers are added to the existing classroom rather than have the entire room reorganized around these centers. In such a way, having centers makes no significant change in classroom practice.

The integrated day, or some variation of it, could also be used in many native primary classrooms. Teachers could allow a range of learning activities to take place at any one time. This would be an improvement over the "three reading groups" approach to the primary grades, wherein the teacher works with one third of the class while the other two thirds wait for her, meanwhile busying themselves with workbooks or other similar activities. Children would spend less of their school time waiting and more time in possibly fruitful learning pursuits.

Each of these aspects of the English Infant School could be introduced into American primary education; some might even be combined. I would hypothesize that they would be incorporated as I have illustrated without making any real difference in the classroom procedures used by the teachers. They might produce some reform, help some children, and provide a degree of freedom for some teachers. There would not be, I feel, any basic difference in the educational system.

Observers of the Englisn school system have often been so involved in looking at classroom procedures that they have failed to inquire into the ideas behind these procedures. It is in these educational ideas that the real difference between the new English primary education and the traditional American primary education lies. Just as progressive education did not differ from traditional education solely on its use of "units" or "projects" as education devises, so English education does not differ from ours simply in the way that things and people are organized.

One of the most important differences lies in the area of educational ideology. Rogers, in a recent Phi Delta Kappan article, characterized English Infant Schools as "process" rather than "product" oriented. I believe that this distinciton is wrong. One must look beyond differences in what children are doing to understand the ideology behind English Infant education. I would postulate that the basic difference between the two systems is that one is a person-oriented education and the other an object-oriented education.

American education tends to be object-oriented. Stemming perhaps from the graded organization of the school which began in the middle of the last century, or from our society's preoccupation with efficiency, or maybe from our total involvement as a society with a factory culture, our schools tend to treat all things, human or otherwise, as "objects." This approach allows for the standardization of elements involved in the educational enterprise, an attribute of any efficiency oriented system.

In most schools all classes have approximately the same number of the children enrolled, classrooms are designed to contain the same space, and school buildings tend to be more alike than different. Teachers may be treated as interchangeable entities, so that one first grade teacher can easily be substituted for any other at any time. Children, too, are treated as interchangeable units in the system. Evaluation is based upon grade level expectation, with a child's performance described in terms of how it differs from the norm. Goals and expectations are determined centrally for all children. Seldom is there any attempt to look at individual differences of learning style or interests, although differences in rate of learning are beginning to be accepted.

The object-oriented school is easy to administer. It can be centrally managed. Curriculum can be prescribed by a single authority. Mass purchasing can be accomplished. Textbooks, furniture and educational supplies can also be ordered and inventoried efficiently with monetary savings resulting. The major problem with such a system is that the human factor is easily overlooked.

The person-oriented school is much more sloppily run. Few functions of the school system can be handled centrally. Elements in the school system are not interchangeable. Decisions cannot be handled as easily by a centralized authority without intimate knowledge of the persons being effected by decisions or the possible consequences of these decisions.

The English system can best be characterized by its lack of centralized authority. Few decisions seem to be handed down from above. It is interesting to note, for example, that the only content required by law of the primary schools is that a corporate act of worship begin each day of instruction. Schools otherwise are free to prescribe their own curriculum. Compare this with the number of laws specifying required hours of instruction in each academic area and requirements that instruction be given in the evils of Communism, alcohol, narcotics, or some other pet legislative hate that characterizes the school codes of so many of our states.

Each Infant School has curriculum autonomy in England. Within a single system one may find many approaches to reading instruction thriving side by side. As a matter of fact, the one attribute that makes English Infant education so difficult to describe and evaluate is its diversity, for within the system one can find almost any kind of school and any type of instruction one wishes. Each head has his own philosophy of education which he will expound at every opportunity. I have never yet had the pleasure of hearing an American elementary school principal discuss his philosophy of education.

Not only are the schools different from one another but the classrooms within each school also differ. There may be a different type organization of materials and equipment in each room. Schools are provided with a prescribed sum to cover the cost of instruction for each child and the head determines how that money will be spent. Inspectors who visit the schools

act as consultants rather than supervisors, and one often has the feeling that these consultants are only tolerated by the teacher. Their communications to teachers take the form of suggestions rather than directives, and teachers may choose to ignore them. Some inspectors have developed such a reputation, however, that their communications carry a great deal of authority. All teachers, heads, and inspectors are concerned with their reputations, for reputation will determine advancement as well as effect professional self-concept. The person is important in the system. A new head is not hired just because his score on a civil service examination is high, but because of the kind of teacher he has been.

This concern for the person carries over into the school's relationship to the child. The individual child is important. He is not known by his social security number or his test scores, but as the kind of individual he is. Teachers and heads often know about his family background. His likes and dislikes, interests and competencies are all considered as a course of study is developed for him. Not every child is expected to go through the same book or "cover" the same content as part of his school experience.

While the smallness of the size of English Infant Schools may support the personalization of education, it is probably not a cause. While the schools are small (Infant Schools usually have between 240 and 360 children in attendance), Infant Schools may be attached to junior schools of the same size or larger. Individual classrooms invariably contain more children

than one would see in comparable American schools (the average class contains forty children) and individual school districts may be large. The decentralization of authority in these districts supports the personalization of education in England.

Most significant, I believe, is the relationship between the kind of educational opportunities provided to young children in England and the English concern for the welfare of children, as well as adults. This concern for welfare can be related to the concept of nurturance used by the pioneers of nursery education over a half century ago. England has a welfare state. Children receive medical and social service from their date of birth. It is the rule rather than the exception that the visiting nurse has been in the child's home during his early years of life. He may have been enrolled in a public school nursery class, if he was one of the favored few. Service personnel may have been to his home to help resolve possible family problems.

Welfare continues to be a concern of the school after the child's enrollment. Medical service is available and a substantial noon time dinner, as well as morning milk will be provided at a very nominal charge, or free, if necessary. The school personnel are interested in the child's total life, not merely his learning of school subjects. This concern for the whole child, for his physical and mental health have, I believe, made a difference in the schools of England.

Our concern with the English Infant School movement is not to study it as an interesting foreign educational phenomenon, but rather because it is a contemporary model of open education. Since it has been suggested

that we import this model into the American school system, the system is important to us. But can we import the system and make it our own without significantly changing it? We could incorporate elements of English Infant education into our schools but that would not make a difference. The key to successful importation must be in transferring the spirit of the school rather than its physical attributes and using this spirit to reconstruct our schools. How can this be done?

One strategy is to attempt to transplant the English Infant School and to have American teachers behave like English Infant teachers. There are two tactics that can be used for this purpose. The first is to bring English Infant school teachers to our country as models for American teachers. The second approach is to send American teachers or teachers-in-training to England to learn their educational system. The University of Illinois is having some experiences with both these techniques. While it is still too early to judge the effect of these attempts, there are some preliminary judgments that one might make.

The Washington Elementary School is a curriculum laboratory operated jointly by the Champaign Board of Education and the Department of Elementary Education of the University of Illinois. Dr. Max Beberman has invited a number of educators from England to work there for varying periods of time. Among the visitors have been Miss Edith Biggs, H.M.I., for mathematics, and Miss Marianne Parry, retired Inspector for Nursery and Infant Schools in Bristol. A number of English classroom teachers have also been invited to the school. One, a Mr. Blackwell, worked for a number of weeks with two

upper elementary classrooms and developed some of the most exciting educational projects I have ever seen.

What has been the result of this type of activity on the teachers of Washington School? I have observed little if any change as a result of these activities. The University personnel are very excited by these contacts. They have enjoyed the interaction with the English educators and have profitted greatly by their presence. The classroom teachers have been interested in viewing these demonstrations, but little observable change in classroom practice can be attributed to the infusion of English educators into an American school.

As a matter of fact some teachers feel a degree of resentment about the whole affair. They were not consulted in determining the direction that the educational innovations proposed at Washington School would take nor in inviting the English educators. Some of the teachers feel that the entire operation has been imposed upon them and while they will tolerate some interference with their normal classroom procedures, they will not change their approach to education as a result of it. It would seem that a person-oriented education must treat teachers as well as children as persons.

This semester the University of Illinois has sent twenty-six of its junior students in Elementary Education to spend a semester in Bristol, England. The students will be attached to three training colleges associated with the Institute for Education of the University of Bristol. Fach student

will also spend four to six weeks interning in an Infant School. Upon their return the students will continue their work towards the bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. They will student teach in Illinois schools and continue to take methods courses as well as other courses they might need to complete their degree. The work in England will substitute for their junior course work in Elementary Education. Students are also taking courses at the English colleges to meet requirements in music, art, mathematics, social sciences, and other subjects.

What is the effect of sending a student abroad to study English Infant educational methods? I do not know. Our students are still in England and will not return until June. We receive letters reporting positive experiences, and I shall be visiting them next month. There is no way to assess the impact of this experience until these young persons become teachers, or student teachers at least, in American schools. Those of us involved in the program are hopeful that it will make a difference. We feel, however, that even if the students' teaching in not affected, the experience of spending a year in English schools and with English students and teachers should have a broadening effect that ought to be valued in its own right.

Both of these approaches to developing open educational systems in the United States focus on importing the English Infant School model and incorporating it into our own schools. I seriously question the advisability of this tactic. English schools have developed as a reflection of English society. The concern for the welfare of children, the autonomy of elements of the teaching profession, the

early entrance age of children, have supported the development of their particular model. Our country has a different set of cultural elements that might not support the same system. Nor are we as small a country as England, and ~~size~~, I believe, has helped the transmission of the new Infant School idea in that country. But face to face contact, possible in a country smaller than the state of Illinois, may not be possible in a country the size of ours.

In addition, accepting the English Infant School model "whole hog" is a denial of our own tradition of open education, a tradition exemplified by the number of progressive schools that have developed in America. Note too that the reform kindergarten movement was very closely tied to the Progressive Education movement. Kindergartens as such do not exist in England. A denial of our own tradition would deny us the use of many resources in American education.

The key to the quality of education in the United States is the teacher. In England it is probably the headmaster who has the greatest influence on the school. Here in the United States, despite the myth of the principal as the "instructional leader," there is no such counterpart. Principals are usually more concerned with management than with school curriculum. Curriculum directives may emanate from a central office where a director of curriculum or a committee, including teachers and supervisors, will develop curriculum guides. Often a supervisory staff is available to consult with teachers and to monitor classroom programs. The teacher, however, has the greatest amount of power in controlling the educational experience offered

to children. (Whether they exercise that power or not is yet another question.)

If the teacher is the key to the educational experience, than any attempt to develop open educational opportunities in the United States must begin by helping teachers. A person-oriented education must accept the teacher as a person as much as the child. Any program of education imposed on teachers cannot be considered open education. The alternative to imposing an outside model on the teacher is to provide teachers with models, helping them understand the model and working with those teachers who accept the model as appropriate, providing needed teaching skills as well as knowledge.

We have started in our small way to help teachers to move in this direction. Our tactic is very simple. We provide a teacher with a sense of where we want them to go, describing the kind of classrooms we want to create and providing models to view. Then we ask the teacher if she would like to come along. If she agrees then we will help her move towards an open classroom. Some of the aid we provide takes the form of selected readings. Informal meetings with our staff and other teachers involved in the same type of teaching also take place. We also provide classroom consultation.

Our staff includes myself, a graduate assistant, and a number of graduate fellows enrolled in an EPDA program. So far our population includes three teachers in the Champaign schools and a number of teachers in Arlington Heights, a suburb of Chicago. Five additional teachers have asked to work with us more recently.

We find that we can get some teachers to change. Teachers often start very slowly, opening up small parts of their classroom, offering arts and crafts as an alternate to workbook exercises, or providing choices of two activities at the end of the day. In time, however, the teachers learn that they can trust children. They increase the number of alternative activities available, eliminate many elements of classroom scheduling and allow children greater degrees of autonomy.

Teachers who are willing to work in this manner have a number of fears at the beginning of the process. They may have difficulty in establishing a relationship with children that is different than the one they have always had. While grouping patterns may change, teachers may not easily move out of the role of lecturer. This may require that feedback be provided to the teacher so that she can see the difference between what she is doing and what she says she is doing.

Teachers also need help in classroom organization. They need to create a classroom environment that will support autonomous learning. A room that is easy to manage and maintain and where materials are accessible to children must be created. Children also need alternative ways of receiving learning instructions. Assignment cards, such as those used in England, have proven to be helpful.

Teachers also ask for help in evaluating learning. As soon as teachers move away from textbook learning they become unsure of what children have learned as well as about the importance of what they are teaching. Simple informal ways of keeping track of children's activities and of assessing their learning have proved to be extremely helpful.

Most important, however, teachers need to feel that what they are doing is worthwhile. The isolation of the teacher in the classroom leads to great feelings of inadequacy. Teachers tend to revert to the curriculum guide or textbook as a result of this feeling of inadequacy. The support teachers have felt as a result of classroom visitations and of informal meetings of groups of like-minded teachers has proved beneficial.

How successful have we been? We operate on a small scale. Out of three teachers in Champaign, two are moving ahead towards developing open classrooms. One has felt that she really cannot teach this way. This has led me to believe that not all teachers can or should teach this way. For the two successful teachers, it is as if we have opened up a new set of opportunities. But it is not what we have done for them that has made them successful; rather it is what they have done with this new found freedom. Our third teacher simply could not teach in an open situation. The lack of predetermined structure, the noise generated by the children, the need to respond individually to each child were more than she was willing to take. Although she had volunteered to become involved, we soon found her backing away from openness and staying as close to prescription as possible.

Teachers can be given support and resources that will help them develop open classrooms. Specific techniques can be provided that will help teachers move towards openness. We feel that teacher training in support of such education needs to be practical and needs to be as close to the teacher's real situation as possible. Although one can train specific behaviors into teachers, this is not the best or most appropriate form of teacher education.

More important than the behaviors, and closely related to the competencies we wish to generate, are the teacher's belief systems. If the teachers have trust in children, believe that autonomy in the classroom is a legitimate goal, are accepting of activity and movement, then an open classroom can be created. If teachers do not believe in these elements of education then no amount of performance training will make a difference.

While the teacher may be the key in developing open educational opportunities for children, whether or not open education really takes hold in the United States may not be a decision for teachers to make. Cremin, in The Transformation of the School, suggests that the demise of the Progressive education movement was the result of its professionalization. While this conclusion might be questioned, there is no doubt that no form of education can develop in the United States without strong public support. The closeness to which the schools are tied to the lay public through school boards and the tax structure allows the local citizen to play a key role in education. As long as open education remains only a professional concern, there is little chance that it will grow to any sizeable movement. Only with public support can it flourish.

It is interesting to me that the contemporary American prophets of open education include as many non-educators as educators. Articles of interest first appeared in the New Republic rather than the NEA Journal or Young Children. Articles relating to education continue to be printed in magazines that range from Life to the New York Review of Books. While

books about English Infant School are presently being authored by educators such as Vincent Rogers and Lilian Weber, others authored by writers outside the profession, such as Charles Silberman, editor for Fortune, will also be appearing. Only with the collaboration of laymen and professionals, with messages beamed at parents as well as teachers, can the movement of open education continue to grow.

I remember reading somewhere, and the source escapes me, that schools can only be as progressive as the societies that support them. The demise of the Progressive Education movement came as a result of changes in the political climate of the United States. The era of the 1950's, characterized by the antics of Senator Joseph McCarthy, saw this movement come to a halt. It was struck down as much by the redbaiting from the outside as from any weaknesses inside the movement.

Open education can only flourish in an open society. I am not sure that we have such an open society at this point in our country. Some analysts suggest that we are developing a split society today. On the one hand are the middle class and working class families. On the other hand are students, college graduates and members of minority groups. Rather than move towards societal consensus, we seemed to be moving towards a greater polarization.

If schools reflect their societies, can we expect open systems of education to flourish in America today? Perhaps rather than having a single form of education in all schools in our country we may have polarized forms of education reflecting polarized values. Headstart and Follow Through

programs are noted for their "planned variations." Bereiter-Engelmann curricula and programs based upon Skinnerian technology are supported side by side with Bank Street Models and English Infant School models. This might be a preview of the future. In years to come we might find our schools polarized along the lines of unplanned variations, with open systems of education provided for some segments of society and tightly organized programs designed for others.

The future of American education will reflect the future of the rest of society. Those of us concerned with open education may look to our professional ties for ways of implementing such systems. We may find, however, that we are defining our professional role too narrowly. For our concern for children will have to go beyond the schoolroom door. While we may not dare to build a new social order, we may have to become more involved with social reality to make the dream of open education an American reality.