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Behaviors Encouraged by the Open Classroom

Steven D. Harlow and John D. Williams

Someone once commented that American public education was very much like a gigantic machine rolling slowly forward in its direction and swallowing up whatever it found in its path. This machine, in coming upon innovations and new approaches, would consume them and make them harmonious--though less interesting--to other parts of itself. The "machine" is presently attempting to digest the approach known as "open education," and what was once considered to be quite bold and even "revolutionary" in its approach to educating children is finding its way into the mainstream of American education. It is today not unusual to find within the most traditional of school districts intermingling among more conventional classrooms a few open classrooms. The fate of the open classroom has not yet been determined; as the educational "machine" attempts to digest this innovation, it is not clear whether the concept of open education will be brought to public acceptance by the open classroom becoming more conventional (and less innovative) or whether the "machine" will itself be somewhat transformed.

The Open Approach--What Is It?

Traub has described the open approach to school as one which gives children the opportunity "to explore their school environment; to make decisions about their own learning; to work at their own pace, following their own style; to learn from concrete experiences before making abstract generalizations; to make errors, presumably without threat of censure, and to be helped to learn them (Newton and Hall, 1974)."

Open education values and attempts to facilitate independence in learning and judgment, creative expression, positive feelings about learning and school, and sound self esteem. The purpose of this article will be to examine pertinent research on open education in order to determine what behaviors are actually encouraged by the open approach to education.

There is some difference of view concerning the readiness of children for participation in the open classroom. The description provided by Traub would suggest a belief in the need of children to learn freely through exploration and discovery. Barth (1972, p. 18) underscores this belief by stating that "children are innately curious and will explore without adult intervention." Yet Kagan has pointed out that discovery learning is by no means an automatically revealed process. Rather, discovery learning hinges upon a child's involvement in the proceedings of the classroom and his intellectual effort. Kagan (1967, p. 162) states "the method of discovery is most appropriate for highly motivated older children...who are inclined to use a reflective strategy. This method is least appropriate for younger children, especially below the age of nine, who do not have high motivation to master intellectual tasks and who tend to be impulsive." McKinney (1973) found that disadvantaged educable handicapped students (eleven years average age) placed in an open classroom situation spent "a disproportionate amount of time wandering around the room, waiting for instructions or attention, standing on the outside of [an] activity watching and conversing about things other than the... task... [they] frequently generated attendant behavior problems."

If we view open education, however, as a classroom where, among other qualities, the process of individualization takes preeminence,

then the task before the teacher becomes one of creating differential environments which meet the different levels of maturity and involvement revealed by students. In line with this, McKinney felt that difficulties among the retarded students could have been resolved by providing adequate structure within the open classroom environment.

Independent Behavior

Franks (in press) has been involved in contrasting five parochial open schools with five parochial conventional schools in the Kansas area. It is significant to point out that eight of the ten schools serve almost exclusively culturally disadvantaged populations. Some interesting findings concerning the degree of independence fostered in the open situation are beginning to emerge. Franks looked at the internal-external locus of judgment among students participating in the schools. Internal and external judgments were determined by the criteria by which the child evaluated his actions and products. External judgment involved the student looking to individuals other than himself to decide what he was to do and to assess how well he had performed. Conversely, internal judgment was seen when a student relied on his own sense of what he was to do and how he was doing. He did this by observing the effects of his own actions and consulting his sense of accomplishment. In answer to the question of "What works better for you: when the teacher gives you a topic, or when you pick the topic?" the majority of students in each of the open schools selected the option which gave them the locus of choice. On the other hand, between 64 percent and 80 percent of the children in the conventional schools preferred to have the teacher assign the topic. In responding to the question

"How do you know when you've done a good job?" 80 percent of the students in conventional classes selected external criteria (such as teacher comments, grades, report cards) while only 42 percent of the open school students relied on such criteria.

The findings of Franks are similar to those of Knowles, who investigated three different classroom environments--open ("free and exploratory"), structured ("geared to the acquisition of specific resources and skills"), and traditional--and their relationship to internal-external locus of evaluation. Using the question "What makes you happy?" Knowles (1973) judged responses as to whether the child perceived his happiness to be dependent upon forces outside his control. This would, of course, represent an external locus of control. A significantly greater internal control was found among students attending the open classroom compared to the other educational settings (interestingly, the structured classroom revealed more internal control than the traditional classroom). These studies would seem to provide evidence that the open environment does in fact stimulate independence of choice and judgment.

Creative Expression

Related to desirability of independent functioning and discovery learning is the open classroom's valuing of the creative process in the child. Patterson (1973, p. 188) has stated that traditional schools "...are geared to conformity in thinking as well as behavior. The creative student is discouraged, so that creative potential, which is present to some degree in everyone, is gradually extinguished in our schools." The present writers went about examining, among other items, the question of whether measured creativity

is more prevalent in open classrooms than in conventional classrooms (Williams, Harlow, and Tuebner, 1973). Performance was compared between open classes and conventional classes on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. To our surprise (we strongly hypothesized the opposite), the findings indicated that students in the open classroom were slightly less creative (though not at a significant level) than their counterparts in the conventional classroom on the Torrance Tests. Similarly, Gerhardt and Harlow (in preparation), when contrasting scores on the Torrance Tests, found no significant differences between students in an open and a traditional classroom in Kansas.

A complete explanation of these findings is not available. When one observes the workings of the open classroom it would, indeed, seem that the accent is on the students' own approach to a problem. This would seemingly encourage creative expression. Yet the findings do not bear out the ostensible advantage of the open classroom. One partial explanation for the less than expected performance by the open classroom students is the variable of standardized tests. The Torrance Tests are highly structured in their administration. Students in open situations as a rule have not had as much experience taking tests--whether classroom or standardized tests. It is conceivable that the results of the two investigations could reflect a lack of practice in taking tests rather than the "actual" creative behavior of the open classroom students. Another explanation for the lack of difference in measured creativity might be that the teacher is either not able or not prepared to function in the open classroom. Too, with an emphasis upon the enjoyable and upon students' determination of the pace and termination of learning tasks, it has been the writers' observation that in some open situations students will often move from one activity to another

before they have either exhausted the possibilities of an activity or have completed the task. Students in these situations have not been challenged and encouraged by the teacher to see a task through to conclusion. In creative efforts, enjoyment must eventually cede to the labors of refinement. Fun and joy may actually keep the child from confronting and wrestling with the difficult. Easiness is not synonymous with creativity. The creative process in children is aided not only by free exploration and a joyful atmosphere, but by challenge and guidance by appreciative individuals.

Attitudes Toward School

The research reviewed by the present writers clearly indicates that the open classroom engenders a favorable attitude toward school. Reid (1972), in investigating 4th and 5th grade students in open and structured self-contained classrooms, found that open classroom students possessed a much more favorable picture of school than their counterparts in the self-contained class. Similarly, Wilson (1972) reported that students in an open plan revealed more positive attitudes toward school than students in traditional classes. Because of its close relationship with University of North Dakota's New School Program (see Silberman, 1970), a great deal of formal and informal evaluation has centered around the Fargo Madison School Program (Center for Teaching and Learning, 1974). One conclusion which emerges from the wealth of data is that children in the open classrooms enjoy the proceedings of their classrooms. This is reflected in both inventories of student attitudes and student attendance. Before the Madison School adopted the New School Plan of open education, absenteeism was epidemic in its

proportions; after the school changed to the open approach its absenteeism was far below the Fargo School System average.

Self Esteem

Summing up what most open education adherents would hold, Barth (1972, p. 22) states that "Confidence in self is closely related to capacity for learning and for making important choices affecting one's learning." As Becker (1971, p. 38) has stated, the "mind grows up as a registering of the consequences of what we do after we do it." In this way the child is able to build a repertoire of predictions about his world. As these predictions begin to bear correspondence to the way things actually occur, the child develops confidence that he is able to understand the world and have an impact upon it.

There exists some evidence that children within the open classroom possess more positive self concepts than children in more traditional settings. Reid reported that the open education students exhibited higher self concept scores than those held by students of conventional classes. To further this conclusion, Wilson found that children in an open plan revealed more positive feelings about themselves than those in a traditional school. Franks (in progress) is discovering through student and parent interviews that a greater number of students in open schools feel good about what they personally achieve in classes when contrasted to students in conventional schools. Moreover, Franks is finding that children in open schools have disclosed, through checklists and interviews, that school offers more varied role behavior with which to identify and a greater number of roles which correspond to that which students personally aspire than is true in control conventional schools.

Individual Variability in the Classroom Situation

One important area that has seldom been the focus of research efforts or considered by innovators is individual differences. We know that different people use different sensory modalities as they approach learning. Some people prefer and seem to need a visual approach, others prefer an auditory, and still others prefer a combination of sensory modalities. Within a modality, such as visual, some may learn better in a conceptual/abstract framework, whereas others may learn more effectively through manipulation of concrete materials. As an example, some people learn geometry as an exercise in logic (conceptual/abstract) whereas others may learn geometry in reference to drawing graphs and concretely relating to the subject matter. In the same way, people would seem to vary in the manner in which they might best learn in a classroom setting. It could well be that a mega-innovation, such as the open classroom, may be beneficial to a majority of the students but not in a way in which a smaller group of students can maximize their learning potential. If reference is made to conceptual systems theory (Harvey, Hunt and Schroeder, 1961) it might be inferred that different personality types might require different learning situations. Harvey et al. posit four major systems with three intermediate stages. While several continua underly their theory, one major dimension is concrete-abstract. The research done regarding conceptual systems theory suggests that more people fall toward the concrete point on the scale. Thus, even if a value is made (which, incidentally, we are not proposing) that abstract, rather than concretistic thinking is encouraged, a major difficulty is that most people operate from a concretistic framework. If the individual is valued, then those students who conceptualize in a concrete

manner should be allowed to learn in a way most appropriate to their existing learning style. The direction of schools' efforts should be to gradually move children toward an open setting, rather than to impose change in such a way that their personal learning is not allowed its fullest development.

Conclusion

We have reviewed a portion of recent pertinent research centering upon open education. No claim is made to the exhaustiveness of our efforts. Rather, what we have attempted to report was research with which we had some familiarity or involvement. Four large areas were looked at: independent behavior, creative expression, attitude toward school, and self esteem.

1. Independent behavior and judgment appear to be furthered by the open approach to education. This should not be construed to suggest that all students (or even a great majority of students) reveal independent behavior in the open setting. What was discovered, rather, is a significantly greater number of students in open classrooms exhibiting evidence of independent behavior than students in conventional classrooms.

2. The two studies reviewed on creativity disclosed no difference between the open and conventional classrooms on scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. It was surmised that the lack of practice in taking tests might have contributed to this result.

3. The appreciation of school by the child as a central area of his personal life (Fargo Madison School Program) is one of the greatest benefits of open education. All the cited studies reported students in open situations viewed school with more favor than students in conventional settings.

4. There is some support for the assumption that an open atmosphere encourages positive feelings about the self. The child in the open classroom feels better about what he is achieving and sees more pertinent role options than does the child in conventional classrooms.

5. Finally, those considering the implementation of an open classroom should be cognizant that even if the open setting would be beneficial for a majority of the students, thought should be given to helping those students who respond more favorably to some other kind of setting. Alternative learning modes more appropriate to the individual probably will be necessary for certain individuals who function better in a more structured learning environment.

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