

WIDE OPEN SPACES

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The future school may be as unlike the school of the past as today's contemporary open air offices are unlike the musty, dusty dens in which clerks perched on stools in Charles Dickens' time. Just as the best housing products of modern imaginative architects can be called places for living so the new schools may be called places for learning - with the emphasis on learning.

The emphasis used to be, and in many places still is, on teaching with the teacher standing on the platform in front of the static class of "desk-chained" children, attentively silent, absorbing facts to be regurgitated later.

Few innovations in schools during the last decade have caused more excitement, more interest, more questioning than the open area teaching concept. Overseas there is an increasing number of open area schools in England, Scotland, United States, Canada and New Zealand. In Australia, South Australia has perhaps developed the idea most quickly, though other States have erected some open units or are about to do so. In Victoria some modest, modified attempts at open planning have been erected - the concept is being more widely accepted and more advanced buildings are being planned for several areas.

The major aim of open-space schools in encouraging greater interaction between both teachers and children reinforces the current idea of removing divisions of teachers, pupils and subjects into tight standardised compartments.

To provide space and facilities for co-operative teaching and learning is to provide accommodation that promotes teacher-facilitated learning rather than teacher-directed learning. Open planning is a challenge to the box-like structure of existing schools and is intended to make it more possible to carry out modern methods.

Open planning is designed to encourage co-operative teaching, team teaching, differentiated teaching which makes use of the individual interests and skills of the teachers; it provides more stimulating education and a higher degree of pupil activity and participation.

Open planning is an attempt to provide the physical environment in which the emphasis may be on learning rather than teaching. Flexible areas quickly adaptable to different kinds of learning situations characterise open planning.

Open planning is conceived as a means by which the needs of individual children may be better catered for. In this setting it will not always be necessary for every child to be receiving the same educational menu at the same time from the same teacher. Numerous learning situations will be contrived and the teacher's role will change from directing to facilitating.

Based on the principle of flexibility in instruction the structure plans of open area school buildings provide for the accommodation of large numbers of children in large work spaces, allowing for various groupings and regroupings of pupils under the direction of teacher teams. In some buildings there are movable interior walls that may partly or entirely screen off sections of the large open space. Another method is by means of mobile room dividers with a variety of useful vertical surfaces made up of chalkboard, pin up, peg board, white screen and magnetic board with horizontal working surfaces on one or both sides.

The work areas differ in sizes according to need, some being equal to double classrooms whereas others may be comparable to six, eight or ten classrooms. The fascinating variations in shape are both functional and pleasing to the eye; triangular, circular, octagonal, L-shaped or rectangular according to the design of the building. The spaces may be linked by corridors or walk-throughs and are referred to as pods, decks or learning areas rather than rooms, divisions or classes.

Acoustics play a significant role in the success of open area teaching. Without acoustical floor coverings the noise level appropriate to teacher-facilitated learning situations would become intolerable and there would be a reversion to teacher-directed instruction which may just as well proceed in the single classroom. In single classrooms, so that modern primary school procedures may be most fruitful, acoustical floor coverings are desirable also. These coverings in soft greens, strong blues, warm golds and vivid rusts make for an attractive and inviting setting for learning and lend themselves to easy natural informality. Such advantages are not characteristic of the cold, hard surfaces of traditional classrooms.

Furnishings are an important consideration of the concept of flexibility. The old fixed desks idea is gone. Instead, ingenious arrangements of tables of trapezoidal, rectangular and square shapes can be organised according to the needs of the children and to fit classroom programmes. The use of tables and chairs, while contributing to the classroom flexibility, has created the problem of storage of pupils' materials. Locker units with individual shelves may be used. In some cases baskets are fitted to the chairs in various places - between the legs or on the back; but any arrangement that hinders the flexibility and profitable use of all space is unsatisfactory. Probably the best arrangement is to have a series of table-height cupboards on castors, each cupboard to contain slide-in space for each child's plastic tray and possessions. Such cupboards can be placed strategically to serve the children as required and, for storage, may be placed against a wall perhaps under extra working space benches - this would necessitate rooms larger than 24 ft x 24 ft (7.3m x 7.3 m).

Adequate and suitable storage is a major consideration for resource media and the increasing quantities and types of equipment and aids required for the creation of learning situations.

The furnishing for staff and children in open plan units must contribute to an environment which encourages greater interaction between pupil and teacher and between teacher and teacher, allow for the adaptation of space as required and make it possible for the teachers to plan jointly and to pool their talents.

Assuming that acoustics and physical arrangements of the area are satisfactory, what can be expected from teachers and pupils functioning there?

What improvements in the general learning pattern may be found? From observations and discussions with teachers who have worked in these multi-class learning centres some of the significant advantages are:

- (a) the facility for re-grouping to meet needs and nourish interest ;
- (b) social behaviour can be readily observed by more than one person;
- (c) growth in mature bearing, as freedom of movement, combined with responsibility is put into practice;
- (d) improvement in attitude, progress and participation of pupils;
- (e) the possibility to give unobtrusive individual assistance as required;
- (f) improvement in pupils' abilities to work independently;
- (g) all children can become involved in a learning situation;
- (h) teachers have the opportunity to do more in an area of competence while being released from an area in which they feel less competent;
- (i) teachers have the opportunity of talking over and sharing problems;
- (j) teachers enjoy the team co-operation in the sharing of the space, the pupils, the activities and the resources ;
- (k) teachers have an opportunity to evaluate their own efforts and share in the evaluation of the children. Some teachers say that they find themselves changing in outlook and in personality as they interact with other members of their team .
- (l) the open area makes it possible to bring the child's world into the classroom.

Most teams function best with a team leader. Status is not necessarily a requisite where a sharing of this role on a rotation basis is preferred.

What types of teachers find success and satisfaction in a setting where group-oriented guidance for children is the pattern of instruction? Those with a pioneering spirit perhaps, who like new adventures. Age and experience seem relatively unimportant considerations when weighed against compatibility. Open area teachers recognise this as the most essential team member trait. Where teams exist, team planning must also exist. Ingenuity must be used to find time for the inter-change of ideas, for arranging the schedules, for deciding who is to introduce a topic, who is to help and in what manner with follow-up activities. Is the subject matter to be shared or are the children to be shared? When, who and how become vital questions in every aspect of team planning. Finding the necessary moments for team planning and evaluating progress presents one of the greatest challenges in open area planning. Some planning may be done after school hours, but short, extra team meetings are often possible. In well established centres the children are able to carry on independently for the first half hour of the school day, while team members brief each other on their specific responsibilities for the remainder of the day.

In the initial stages of open area development it is wise to have short term objectives with flexible scheduling and easily changed arrangements.

Open area teachers who are sensitive to noise distraction use

various quiet strategies such as flashing ceiling lights on and off as a signal to all to moderate their voices. Other teachers prefer to forestall noise volume that exceeds tolerance levels by arranging for quiet activities with some pupils while the others are engaged in lively learning situations. Pupils who are easily distracted by sound have opportunity to use the study carrels or small withdrawal areas.

A child in difficulty can more readily be helped over a learning hurdle in the open area than in the enclosed classroom. He need not be made conspicuous before his peers. Similarly the show-off does not easily find an audience for his antics. The climate for learning is more natural and a more comfortable one for the child.

How are the pupils evaluated? A filing system is common, with a file for each pupil containing brief comments plus a memorandum of specific troubles he is encountering. Books and materials are listed as well as statements on progress. Often pupils are able to keep a plan book of their own, writing down their assignments under the appropriate date. With the interchange of groupings throughout the day such information is helpful and essential for both pupils and teachers.

In some learning centres the use of aides helps to free the teachers from routine tasks. The aides help the teachers to gain added team planning time and enables them to give undivided attention to small groups and individuals in much more measure than when acting alone.

As with all school innovations there are problems, but as time passes teachers and pupils will appreciate the advantages of the "wide open space". The narrow restrictive influences of the conventional classrooms are overcome and the potential of pupils and teachers is unleashed.

In such places there will be more significance in the old saying:

"What I hear, I forget,
What I see, I remember,
What I do, I understand."

The responsibility of leadership in developing schools for this and future generations of boys and girls must be accepted by educators who must make certain that buildings become an integral part of the changing educational programme.

Much has been accomplished over the years in learning about child growth and development, the psychology of learning and teaching methods and aids. Much more will continue to be learned through research and experimentation in the years ahead. Those who plan school buildings of the future must take this knowledge into consideration. They must accept the fact that what is built will have a long life, that the elementary school programme will change, and that the ideal school has not yet been built.

The creative minds of all who have a part in building a school - children, teachers, administrators, parents, citizens, architects, engineers and designers of equipment and materials - must be utilised to full advantage.