[MS:-0087.002.006.002]

SOME ARTICLES ON THE OPEN CLASSROOM

REPRINTED FROM THE

COUNCIL FOR BASIC EDUCATION CBE

# BULLETIN

*Issued by the Council for Basic Education*
*725 Fifteenth Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20005*

**Editor: Mortimer Smith**

VOL. 16, NO. 3 NOVEMBER 1971

## THE OPEN CLASSROOM: PROCEED WITH CAUTION

In the lead article in the September *Bulletin* ("Is Common Sense Breaking Through?") we suggested that some of the utopian reformers of high school education are taking a second look at what they have wrought and do not find it altogether satisfactory. We wish as much could be said about some of the reformers of the elementary schools. In particular we think the time has come for a careful reappraisal of the various practices that are carried on as part of the "open school" or "open classroom" concept. In the wake of several books by the utopian radicals in education, the open classroom has come into its own. It is *the* educational fashion of the moment, to be seen in the classrooms of big cities, the suburbs, and village hamlets. At least one state department of education, New York's, has given the official imprimatur to a whole set of educational ideas and practices associated with the "open" concept. The department is sponsoring a Project Redesign or New System of Education, and Commissioner Ewald Nyquist has made clear that the old system has got to go, a system characterized, he says, by "information gathering, with its fact-centered, course-centered, subject-centered, grade-getting, bell-interrupted activities, and fragmentation in terms of space, subjects, and teachers." ("Facts" and "subject-matter" are invariably naughty words in the lexicon of the open classroom advocates.)

In the many letters that come to CBE from parents around the country the open classroom now ranks with reading instruction as a cause of discontent with the schools. Many parents complain that the course-centered, subject-centered curriculum is already on the way out. They claim that open classroom experiments are being tried without sufficient preliminary briefing in the community. What often happens is that administrators, anxious to jump on the current bandwagon, bring in outside "experts" (always advocates) but do not provide representation for the other side. To tell the melancholy truth, it is not easy to find an educator who is willing to testify against open classrooms, for most educators are reluctant to question that sacred cow, "innovation." The layman, of course, is rarely considered competent to have a valid opinion, unless it happens to coincide with the opinions of the professionals.

Once the "open" experiment is adopted, administrators and teachers are by no means invariably sure of what it's all about. Does the open classroom necessarily mean open space, that is, absence of partitions? Or does it relate primarily to an informal atmosphere? "Humaneness" is one of the shibboleths of the movement, but the word seems to be used in a special sense; the teacher is apparently expected not only to treat his or her pupils kindly and with justice but to establish some kind of "loving" relationship. "Freedom" is certainly part of the "open" concept, but how far are pupils supposed to follow their own inclinations? And above all, what is the place of subject matter and structured learning? Is the teacher to follow the pattern of English infant schools where informality seems for the most part to be successfully combined with academic accomplishment, or is he to resist all imposition of academic requirements and standards?

If school staffs are vague about the answers to these important questions it is because the open classroom to date has been more a slogan than a program. Perhaps in some places the whole idea has been carefully thought out and practice represents a rational and coherent approach, but our impression is that most school people, like most parents, are floundering in a sea of uncertainty and bewilderment.

We are sure that there are some valid insights and useful practices associated with the open classroom concept, but let's not assume that it contains all educational wisdom. What seems to be happening is that schoolmen, long accused of standpattism, are now buying change for change's sake and are trying to convince parents of the dire consequences if the changes are not adopted. We sympathize with those parents who want some proof of the workability of innovations, some evidence that the changes are indeed going to help the schools in their primary task of seeing that children learn.

VOL. 15, NO. 7 MARCH 1971

## CRISIS IN THE CLASSROOM, BRITISH STYLE

Current British reforms in education are admired by many American writers on education, but on the home front there is far from universal agreement about their usefulness. Stuart Froome's *Why Tommy Isn't Learning* (reviewed here last October) presents proof that the "new progressivism" in English schools is hardly a boon to the basic skills. There is now appearing a series of Black Papers by a group of English educators which makes criticisms similar to Froome's. This is the way these educators state their position: "It is our belief that disastrous mistakes are being made in modern education, and that an urgent reappraisal is required of the assumptions on which 'progressive' ideas, now in the ascendant, are based."

*Black Paper Three*, edited by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, contains several interesting and forthright discussions of various aspects of current reform. The tone is set by the opening article, a "Letter to Members of Parliament," from which we quote:

> Intelligent progressives rightly believe in the value of discovery methods, creative activity, new techniques of learning. So do we, when these methods are applied with common sense. But intelligent concern for new methods shades off quickly into the belief that children must find out everything for themselves, must never be told, never be made to do anything, that they are naturally good, must be free of all constraints of authority. Parents know how often the teachers in a progressive school do not properly understand the sophisticated techniques of "progressivism," and slip into easy acceptance of this permissive ethos. A teacher is an authority, a person specially trained to develop the potentiality of his pupils and in the disciplines of study. It is his duty to pass on skills and wisdom to children, and to ensure that they are trained in civilised manners and ways of thought. If he abdicates these responsibilities he is guilty of the most serious neglect. This training must include helping children to evaluate the teacher's own opinions critically, to look objectively at all dogmas. But the duty of parents and teachers is *to direct*, not to remain passive and uncommitted to high standards of behaviour and learning. The results of permissive education can be seen all round us, in the growth of anarchy. For if adults withdraw and allow children to find their own "true" personality, the result is a vacuum into which all the worst features of the pop and drug world can enter.

VOL. 15, NO. 2 OCTOBER 1970

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Are Schools Killers of the Dream?

The big book in education this season, both in size and potential influence, will undoubtedly be *Crisis in the Classroom* by Charles E. Silberman (Random House, New York, 552 pages, $10.00). It may become one of the important documents (like the old Eight-Year Study) in the present recrudescence of the progressive movement in education. We use the term "document" advisedly for the book seems to be less the work of an individual author than of a committee. Perhaps this is inevitable for in the making of the book the author was convoyed by a research staff of four, an advisory commission of twelve, and $300,000 in foundation money. "The general function of committees," said the late Mr. Justice Holmes, "is to take the personality out of discourse." There is little personality in *Crisis in the Classroom*, even when the author tells personal anecdotes. The reader can almost see an invisible label announcing: "Major Work." There is saturation coverage of all aspects of education, innumerable examples of actual classrooms at work, copious footnotes, and rigorous eschewing of wit or humor. It is a very sober book, both in its style and its message.

What is the message? It is a discursive book, rather loosely focused, with many themes and sub-themes, but primarily Silberman is saying that there is a crisis because the schools are not humane and education as now carried on is devoid of feeling. Schools are grim, joyless places, "killers of the dream," he says, appropriating a phrase of Lillian Smith's. They are grim because the atmosphere is restrictive and coercive, with a high degree of formality and little flexibility, and a deliberate effort on the part of teachers and administrators to "mutilate" spontaneity, joy in learning, creativity. Silberman goes in for "overkill": he does not say that this oppressive atmosphere prevails in some, or in many schools; he insists that it prevails in *most* American schools.

Although he expresses some sharp disagreement with the Friedenberg-Goodman-Holt-Kozol school of educational thought, he does accept their thesis that one of the greatest enemies of the humane spirit in the classroom is formal structure of the curriculum and formal discipline. Like the old progressives, his watchword for the schools is "freedom."

He maintains that none of the educational reforms of recent years has been effective. Although he is not unsympathetic to those who advocate basic education (he calls them the traditionalists) or to those who undertook the reform of the scientific curriculum in the late 50's and early 60's, he believes they failed. You "gotta have heart," implies Mr. Silberman, and they just didn't have it. The same failure is true, he claims, for such mechanical changes in the educational program as team teaching, ungraded schools, and teaching by television.

What, then, is Silberman's cure for what ails us? Taking his cue in large part from the "open classroom" experiments in England and from the few "non-repressive" schools he has been able to find in America, his miracle pill seems to be compounded of equal parts of informality, humaneness, classroom democracy, creativity, freedom for the students to follow their own inclinations—and teachers trained to administer this remedy.

Considered historically, this is hardly a revolutionary proposal. Thousands upon thousands of teachers from 1920 to 1960 were indoctrinated in our schools of education with precisely the things Silberman says can now save us. Certainly teachers of the last two or three generations were influenced in their practice more by the progressives than by the traditionalists, more by William Heard Kilpatrick and John Dewey (Silberman's hero) than by I. L. Kandel or William Bagley. One would have thought that many of the reforms Silberman advocates have been with us for a long time. And some would say that if our schools are in the mess he claims they are in, some of the fault can be traced to an excess of informality, freedom, and classroom democracy.

For a writer who has seemingly steeped himself in the educational happenings of the past fifty years, Silberman has forgotten a great deal. One can only be amazed at some of the things he lists as examples of revolutionary practice in the new informal classrooms: rock collections, writing stories, putting on plays, exhibiting fish and turtles, doing research on one's town, putting pupils' art work on the bulletin board, and encouraging the non-successful by saying, "Mario is trying very hard." Does he really believe that these commonplaces of the classroom, known to anyone who has been inside a school during the last forty years, are the daring inventions of contemporary educational reformers?

One can agree with Silberman's contention that too many schools and too many teachers lack genuine concern for children, and that too much of the educational diet is tasteless and not nutritious. But the correction of this unsatisfactory condition can hardly be accomplished by accepting his absolutist position that the informal approach to teaching is the only approach, and that teachers who prefer a more formal approach are unsympathetic to the child. Silberman's position is a popular one at the moment, and because it is an extreme one it gets

lots of press coverage. Those in education who can remember the past will recognize it for what it is—warmed-over progressivism.

The real heroes in American education rarely get mentioned in books or in the press or receive recognition at educational conferences. They are the teachers who ignore the fashions of the moment and who in quiet ways exert authority without being authoritarian, exert their responsibility for teaching without hating children or acting like Mr. Squeers of Dotheboys Hall. They go unsung in the accounts of those of our educational reformers who think you can't have reform without a pill or a gimmick. American education has its grievous faults, as CBE has been pointing out for the past fourteen years, but Silberman's contention that most schools and most teachers are killers of the dream seems to us to be simply gross overstatement.

In *Crisis in the Classroom*, the author is fond of quoting from that excellent book, *Talks to Teachers*, which William James published over seventy-five years ago. Perhaps a fitting end to this review is a quotation from the book that Silberman did *not* use, one that comments eloquently on his general thesis: "We have of late been hearing much of the philosophy of tenderness in education; 'interest' must be assiduously awakened in everything, difficulties must be smoothed away. *Soft* pedagogics have taken the place of the old steep and rocky path to learning. But from this lukewarm air the bracing oxygen of effort is left out. It is nonsense to suppose that every step in education *can* be interesting."

VOL. 14, NO. 8 APRIL 1970

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Open Classroom and the Closed Mind

Herbert Kohl, author of *36 Children* and *Teaching the "Unteachable,"* has written a new book, *The Open Classroom* (A New York Review/Vintage Book, paperback, $1.65). It is in many ways a non-book, running to 116 pages, filled out by several blank sheets on which the reader is directed to make his own notes—always a bad sign. *The Open Classroom*, described as "a handbook for teachers who want to work in an open environment," suffers from a malady that has assumed epidemic proportions in our time: the romantic-radical's propensity for issuing the most bland and obvious suggestions for change as if they were original. He makes the occasional point that will cause a teacher to nod in mild approval, as when he lashes out at the record-keeping and the unrelated standardized testing that rob teachers' time and efforts. But most of his pronouncements are vacuous and condescending to the greenest of beginning teachers: ". . . begin perceiving the classroom as a place where strong and interesting experiences take place, rather than one where the objective performances of students are measured."

Begin perceiving indeed! It is Mr. Kohl's perception that is in its infancy, leading him to a gross impression of the techniques and intelligence of his colleagues that is not liable to make him their spiritual leader. He sees teachers as robot wardens in a penal colony. He sees schools as places where students are abused, beaten, insulted, segregated by sex, thrust behind nailed-down desks, and branded indelibly by secret dossiers. There is no suggestion that schools are now rapidly losing their authority as well as their authoritarian ways. To him they are Kafka-esque in their faceless power and Dickensian in their methods.

In combating the "pathology of the classroom," Kohl derides the lesson plan and teacher authority. Nothing new here. He even takes a swipe at the permissive teacher who shows no emotion and manipulates rather than oppresses openly. He advocates showing one's anger in the classroom, as if this never happens. He believes in making the classroom a comfortable place. He believes in graffiti as "a possible form of writing." He believes in field trips. He believes in listening to students and admitting one's blunders. He believes in allowing students to select their projects and pursue their interests. He believes in talking over their problems with them. This is faculty-room chatter, and it breaks no new ground.

But amidst this patronizing blandness, a more interesting—and more ominous—motif appears. In discussing the arrangement of the open classroom, he says, "there is an advantage to the door being away from activity. Nosey teachers and administrators will see less when they sneak a look into the room." Later, in discussing the possible disruption that the noise of the open classroom might cause, he suggests the following technique:

> If a particular teacher becomes threatening and your supervisors also disapprove of noise then you may be able to find a way to calm the teacher down and negotiate a truce. Perhaps you can find that teacher's weakness and complain about it, instead of being defensive. . . .

Kohl, as liberating leader of teachers, becomes the victim of their conspiracy. He warns of teachers who engage one in informal discussions, for their "admission of failure can be a liberal ruse to get a new teacher to talk about himself." He reaches the end of the line by suggesting the teacher have lunch in his own room, avoiding the faculty dining room. Near the end—of the book and of our patience—he includes the following list:

> —keep two sets of lesson plans, one for the supervisor that follows the curriculum and another for oneself that deals with the reality of one's classroom
> —create a set of authoritarian lessons to use when supervisors observe
> —be polite and silent at faculty meetings
> —seem to comply with administrative directives

The pathology, it turns out, is not so much in the classroom as in the mind. What begins as a colorless handbook for change ends as a self-portrait of the author. All evidence to the contrary aside, schools are not very fertile ground for this kind of inner-motivated revolution. Youngsters are conformists liable to close their ranks against a teacher who exudes platitudes and yearns for a cult. Mr. Kohl speaks admiringly of a teacher who resigned in disgust, leaving inflammatory evidence about faculty and school in the students' hands. Youngsters hungry for a cause can be duped by such methods. On the other hand, they may well be repelled.

Nor are most teachers quite so tractable as Mr. Kohl hopes. There is a chapter heading called "An Aside on Finding an Ally and Building a School Within a School." Here, forgetting that one's colleagues are menaces, the author urges collective effort against administrators and parents: "they can use isolated radical teachers as scapegoats, but groups of radical teachers frighten them, and they keep away."

To regard a public school as if it were a banana-republic police state, to imagine oneself a Machiavellian figure at court are dreary self-delusions. But, as usual, the youngsters are the losers. Even the conventional field trip must be altered to serve the cause. The author sees the field trip in part as a way of

> infiltrating the institutions that control lives –hospitals, banks, gas stations, supermarkets– and humanizing them. School at its best can be a place where young people can come to know themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and get themselves ready to change a society which makes so little sense.

Woe to the youngster who is in school because he wants to find his place within the existing framework of society. Woe to him who will not fuel the flames of revolutionary zeal. But, luckily, people, old and young, are more complicated than Mr. Kohl's philosophy dreams of . . . and less easily led.

### A WORD ABOUT THE COUNCIL

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### CBE PUBLICATIONS

1. *Who Controls American Education? A Guide for Laymen*, by James D. Koerner. Price $4.95, paperback $2.45. Order from Beacon Press, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass. 02108. (1968)

2. *Reform in Education: England and the United States*, by James D. Koerner. Price $8.95. Order from Delacorte Press, 750 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. (1968)

3. *A Citizen's Manual for Public Schools* (revised and enlarged edition), by Mortimer Smith. Price $1.45. Order from CBE. (1965)

4. *A Decade of Comment on Education, 1956-1966*, edited by Mortimer Smith. Price $1.50. Order from CBE. (1966)

5. *High School English Textbooks: A Critical Examination*, by James J. Lynch and Bertrand Evans. Price $4.95. Order from CBE. (1963)

6. *Swiss Schools and Ours: Why Theirs Are Better*, by Admiral H. G. Rickover. Price $3.95. Order from CBE. (1962)

7. *Teaching the Third R: A Comparative Study of American and European Textbooks in Arithmetic*, by Charles H. Schutter and Richard L. Spreckelmeyer. Price $1.00. Order from CBE. (1959)

8. *Tomorrow's Illiterates: The State of Reading Instruction Today*, edited by Charles Child Walcutt, with an introduction by Jacques Barzun. Price $3.95. Order from CBE. (1961)

9. *The Case for Basic Education: A Program of Aims for Public Schools*, edited by J. D. Koerner, with an introduction by Clifton Fadiman. Price $4.00. Also available as a paperback, $1.95. Order from CBE. (1959)

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