

THE OPEN CLASSROOM

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Chapter

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Many people, if asked to describe the classrooms they attended as elementary school students, would more than likely have very similar responses. They would probably remember a square or rectangular room in which the desks were all arranged neatly in rows. At the front of the room was the teacher's desk, facing the students. From this vantage point, the teacher could not only direct classroom activities with a minimum of effort, she could also keep an eye out for potential disturbances. In most cases, the classroom was completely teacher-directed. Students seldom had any choice as to what they did in the classroom. Any child who questioned the authority or methods of the teacher was labeled as a "discipline problem."

The classrooms of today and of twenty years ago, except in rare instances, differ very little from the average classroom at the turn of the twentieth century:

. . . it is arranged to make things easy for the teacher who wishes quick and tangible results; that it disregards the full development of the pupils. It is arranged on the fatal plan of a hothouse, forcing to a sterile show, rather than fostering all-around growth. It does not foster an individuality capable of . . . creative activities. It disregards the present needs of the child, the fact that he is living a full life each year and hour, not waiting to live in some period defined by his elders, when school is a thing of the past. . . . Nature has not adapted the young animal to the narrow desk, the crowded curriculum, the silent absorption of complicated facts.¹

Within the past decade there has been a tremendous increase in the

criticism of the traditional method of educating our children. Educators and parents are now becoming much less satisfied with the products coming out of our public schools (although other members of the same two groups are usually responsible for the fact that change occurs so slowly in the field of education). Teachers, being the ones directly responsible for implementing what occurs in the classroom, receive the major share of the criticism for an unsatisfactory product.

Educators have been planting children in rows and telling them to grow in certain ways. This has produced on the one hand people dedicated to the status quo and on the other a lot of rebels.²

The image of the teacher has suffered as a result of this widely read and discussed criticism.

To read some of the more important and influential contemporary critics of education -- men like Edgar Friedenberg, Paul Goodman, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol -- one might think that the schools are staffed by sadists and clods who are drawn into teaching by the lure of upward mobility and the opportunity to take out their anger. . . on the students.³

The teacher is not always at fault, however. Many teachers who have tried new ideas and methods in their classrooms have abandoned these ideas and methods for a variety of reasons. Often they receive little or no cooperation from the principal or fellow teachers. Parents sometimes question the advisability of innovations. Students who have become accustomed to the traditional classroom occasionally have difficulty adjusting to a new situation. The teachers themselves frequently fear personal failure. Unsuspected school personnel may influence the day-to-day operation of the classroom:

The personnel who clean the school frequently find that it is easier to clean the school if the chairs and tables are left in rows at the end of the working day. Frequently they will attempt to put pressure on the teachers to leave the chairs and tables in orderly rows, rather than grouped for