

Open Education

Open education refers to a philosophy, a set of practices, and a reform movement in early childhood and elementary education that flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. It received support from similar work that had been developing for many years in England, where it was simply termed *modern* education. Its development in both countries relied upon the long tradition of Progressive education.

Known for its spirited, **child-centered classrooms**, open education was viewed by proponents as a **humane, liberating alternative** to the more formal classrooms of its day. To detractors, its informalities represented an abdication by teachers of their duty to instruct, an indulgence that failed to hold students or teachers accountable. Where adherents saw independent, individualized learning, critics saw chaos. At the height of its popularity, the ideas of open education influenced at most 20 percent of infant (ages 5–7) or junior (ages 8–11) schools in England and perhaps half that number of comparable schools in the United States.

The Classroom

The open classroom, at its best, is a **busy laboratory, richly provisioned with materials for learning**. Alone or in small groups, children move from one work area to another, using balance beams, colored beads, blocks, and other hands-on material in the mathematics corner; working on art projects in paint, clay, or construction scraps; reading quietly or aloud to others from books or from their own illustrated reports.

The room itself is arranged into several separate learning centers, a functional organization that invites **choice of participation** in a variety of activities. The school day is **flexibly scheduled**, allowing students to determine for themselves when an activity merits more time and when it is completed. Class meetings often start and end each day, providing time to give announcements and news, negotiate assignments, and share projects. The teacher rarely calls the entire class together for group instruction. **Classes are composed of mixed ages**, a vertical group setting in which children encounter points of view and abilities other than their own. This "**family grouping**" also encourages **cooperative learning and social responsibility**, with older students helping younger ones. Within the classroom, the teacher circulates among students, extending their learning by commenting and responding to their work, asking leading questions, and suggesting further directions for them to explore. The curriculum is necessarily flexible, responsive, and organic.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Open education believes in the following tenets:

- Children's fundamental desire and capacity to conduct their own inquiries and to learn in their own way from direct experience
- The right of children to take significant responsibility for their own education
- A "whole child" approach that includes the emotional and social aspects of learning
- A reciprocal relationship between school and community
- School as an environment for personal choice and fulfillment, not as mere training ground for pre-selected social roles

- The curriculum as better learned through **direct experience** than from textbook formulation
- Teachers functioning as observers, guides, and providers of resources, materials, and experiences suited to the needs and interests of students

A general optimism prevails, both about children's capacity to respond positively to freedom and independence, and about school as a miniature democracy preparing a self-motivated, responsible citizenry.

These ideas are grounded in the Progressive philosophy of American educator John Dewey (1859–1952), and in the developmental psychology of Swiss clinician and theoretician Jean Piaget (1896–1980). Dewey believed that learning results from the real-life experiences of a growing mind; it is the "process of learning to think through the solution of real problems" (Dworkin, p. 20) by means of active inquiry and experience, not by memorization and recitation. The school is a microcosm of society, not to be separated from the child's familiar context of family, community, social norms, daily life—all areas that children need to confront and comprehend. Education is a process of living in the here and now, not a preparation for future life. If each child is brought into "membership within a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious," Dewey wrote (Dworkin, p. 49). Throughout, he emphasized the value and importance of childhood and the influence of social environment upon individual development. All this reflects a long-standing American faith in the civilizing power of education via the common school.

As a "genetic psychologist," Piaget studied the quality, sequence, and development of mental concepts in children. Through exploration and interaction with things around them, children build structures that explain the world and how it works. New experience and deeper understanding force modification of earlier formulations, as the child's inner framework is reshaped and restructured to accommodate new realities. This process commences in very concrete ways when the child is small; later, at ages seven or eight, the mind begins to develop more structured thought, and in early adolescence moves on to abstract conceptualization. Every child goes through this process: the sequence is invariable, though the speed, style, and quality of growth vary. According to Piaget, children are the architects of their own individual intellectual growth, and this concept provides the link to Dewey and Progressive education: children are born with the natural ability to do their own learning, a capability that in part defines the evolutionary heritage of the human race.

In fact, for many reasons, open education defied empirical evaluation, as it favored:

- Collaborative learning, where it is difficult to determine individual achievement
- Student participation in planning and in setting goals
- An evolving curriculum rather than the set scope- and-sequence chart of a more traditional school
- Standardized testing to be used only as a diagnostic tool
- Process over product, long-term goals over short, and affective as well as academic ends.

Because open education included a variety of similar but not identical classrooms, no standard measure of "openness" was ever established. For researchers, it proved impossible to establish clear experimental and control groups, a basic necessity for conventional studies.