LET'S OPEN THE SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM

Mitsuo Adachi

The current focus in educational innovation is the open classroom. To individualize, the open classroom is necessary. To team teach, large classrooms with no walls are a must. To accomplish both, a center which houses 500 to 600 students under one roof with no partitions is highly desirable. In this mood for change, the self-contained classroom and the self-contained classroom teacher seem far removed from the movement toward the open-school concept.

There is no doubt that the movement for the open classroom has enhanced creativity and innovations into the organizational pattern as well as the curriculum of the schools. However, we must also face up to the reality that the self-contained classroom will be with us for many decades. The economic factors affecting school financing are real and serious. There will be no wholesale removal of the self-contained classroom.

The self-contained classroom is associated with rigidity and tightness of the time block allotted to the different subject content. We are also given the impression that the self-contained classroom is void of the “most powerful single concept presently being applied to schools for children,” that is, the open classroom. In contrast, the open classroom is said to have flexibility in scheduling with time blocks being developed according to the task at hand. This means that there is not the set time block for mathematics, language arts, and other subject areas. The magnitude of a job is the determiner of the number of minutes students will be given to spend on the task.

The national concern to return to the basics may be indirectly related to the desire of many people to return to the concept of the little old red schoolhouse, that is, in the mode of the self-contained classroom. It is not the purpose of this article to give credence to such a movement through the perpetuation of the self-contained classroom. However, the realities must be faced. The self-contained classrooms will be with us. There is a need, however, to examine the use of the self-contained classrooms to meet the mounting problems of non-achievement in the academic areas. There is also the serious problem of improving the self-concept of the low achieving students in the self-contained classrooms.

This article will be concerned with improving the organizational pattern of the self-contained classroom as it relates to the time structure of the daily and weekly schedule. As a coordinator of the student teaching program, the writer is very closely associated with the public schools and has observed student teachers in open, as well as in self-contained, classrooms. Observations of classroom activities in both open classroom and self-contained situations indicate, however, that flexibility and good teaching are still evident in the self-contained classrooms and that structure and rigidity are not totally absent in the open classroom. The self-contained classroom is more open than many of us realize.

The writer observed the following language arts activity in a self-contained classroom. The objectives of the lesson were tied in to creative writing with the culminating activity involving the production of a newsletter. The classroom activities began at 11:00 a.m. and continued until noon, the normal lunch break. At lunch, the student teacher asked the writer whether he was available to continue the observation of the culminating activity which was planned for 1:30 in the afternoon. She stated that the regular schedule had been altered so that students would carry on the newsletter activity immediately after lunch, continuing until school ended for the day.

The writer had noted the enthusiasm of the students at the lunch line, especially as they discussed setting up the printing equipment (obtained from a science program) to run the newsletter. Flexibility in scheduling, allowing the teacher to continue the activity and take advantage of the
motivation of the students in this self-contained situation, was a pleasant change from the structured time block. The writer noted that the students would be involved in the newsletter activity for approximately two and a half hours.

In a team-teaching and open-classroom situation, the writer observed another student teacher in a forty-minute art activity block. Just at the stage where the data indicated great enthusiasm by the students for the art activity, the writer saw twenty students waiting to enter the art activity area for their block of time in art. Needless to say, the teacher rushed through with the closing of the lesson because another teacher was waiting for her students.

The current concern for the low scores in reading and mathematics call for prescriptive and diagnostic techniques by the classroom teacher. In a team-teaching situation, it is possible for one teacher on the team to take the responsibility for implementing a program ministering to the students experiencing learning difficulties. The teacher in the self-contained classroom, too, although alone with a myriad of problems, can meet the problem of learning difficulties through a more flexible daily schedule. Forty minutes for mathematics daily, for example, is not the solution. A longer time block for mathematics is necessary for the teacher in the self-contained classroom working with students experiencing learning difficulties.

The writer was privileged to observe, for seventy-five minutes, a mathematics class of fourth graders in a self-contained classroom. There were three ability groups. What was significant was that the lower-ability students had the full attention of the teacher with the extended time. While the capable students were engaged in reinforcement or enrichment activities, the teacher was able to spend time with each of the lower-ability students experiencing learning difficulties. The teacher of this self-contained classroom scheduled mathematics for three days of the week.

It seems that successful reading programs for the low-achieving students have one consistent factor. It is the personal, one-to-one, scheduled conference between the teacher and the student for a minimum of ten minutes weekly. The traditional classroom schedule, because of its rigid adherence to short time modules, will not permit the scheduling of these conferences. A longer time module is needed so that conferences can be conducted in the subject area time block. Such conferences then become more relevant. Such conferences can do much to enhance the positive self-concept of the students.

Peer tutoring, independent study, and other innovative techniques associated with the open classroom are possible in the self-contained classroom. Peer tutoring especially should be a part of the self-contained classroom operation. What is evident as the students teach their peers is that because teaching requires verbalization, the tutors are able to internalize the learning as they teach so that for the tutors, additional reinforcement activities will not be necessary.

No doubt, the teacher in the self-contained classroom will be challenged to sense the mood of the students more intensively when blocked schedules as such are not part of the daily schedule. However, there is the concern of a teacher being carried away and spending too much time in the subject areas of his strength and relegating other subject areas to lesser roles. It is important, therefore, that the teachers in the self-contained classrooms operating on "open" time modules use their professional judgment to maintain a balanced curriculum.

The self-contained classroom and the self-contained classroom teacher have much to offer in implementing the current curriculum and organizational innovations. This is not to say that we should perpetuate the self-contained classroom. However, in the interim before schools for tomorrow become a reality, we cannot relegate the self-contained classroom to a second-class status in terms of material and personnel input. There is much that the self-contained classroom and the self-contained teacher can do to achieve the openness and flexibility of the open classroom.

In conclusion, a flexible time schedule for creating the "open" self-contained classroom is offered for consideration by teachers and administrators who work in the self-contained setting. No doubt, other effective and tested models exist. It is hoped
FIGURE 1
OPEN SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM
Weekly Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:10</td>
<td>School opening activities</td>
<td>Language Arts/Reading</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>LA/Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:10-10:30</td>
<td>Recess</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>LA/Reading</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:45-12:30</td>
<td>Lunch Break</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15</td>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>Music</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The time modules for the subject areas are as follows for the week: Language Arts/Reading (555 minutes); Social Studies (270 minutes); Science (150 minutes); Mathematics (225 minutes); Physical Education (105 minutes); Art (60 minutes), and Music (60 minutes).

that an examination and the ensuing discussing of the time structure will encourage more deviations from the tight block schedule toward the "open" self-contained classroom (see Figure 1).

The time frames given to the various subject areas are not based on a set structure. For many years, the teachers with the Hawaii Department of Education used the "pie" chart to determine the weekly blocked schedule. The "pie" chart, for example, specified sixty minutes for developmental reading and forty minutes for mathematics at the upper elementary grades daily. Adherence to the "pie" chart was highly recommended.

The suggested "open" self-contained classroom weekly schedule may change from day to day. What is important is that the teacher will have sufficient time to meet the objectives of the lesson at a pace consistent with meeting the needs of all of the students in the classroom.

There is much to be done to make schools consistent with the changing times. The self-contained classroom has tremendous potential for incorporating the innovations of the open classroom. If openness is consistent with the changing times, then let's open the self-contained classroom.

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