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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Marsh, Leonard

Alongside the Child

New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, Pp. vi +154.

... the aesthetic drive which motivates ... places a powerful weapon in the hands of the teacher. As an internal force in the pupil, it is the counterpart of the creative teacher's own efforts. The teacher becomes a partner to the pupil. His deferring attitude joins the aesthetic tendency in the pupil to produce an autonomous functioning of the pupil's personality.¹

If, in America, the "open classroom" concept, with all of its potential for teacher enlightenment and educational change, is not to go the way of the much maligned and misunderstood "progressive education," current misconceptions and ignorance concerning its theoretical rationale and practical administration must be faced and removed. In this book, *Alongside the Child*, creative American teachers, concerned with quality education, and innovations which may help to achieve it for young children, will find answers to many questions about the English primary schools, where open classroom situations are functioning successfully. In the book, Leonard Marsh makes a plea for teachers and students "to take a second look at some of the educational theories which they use to guide their work" with young children. It is not that educators are held back by lack of basic knowledge; but, rather, that there is inadequate mediation of much of what already is known. He suggests that teachers need to keep reminding themselves that basic techniques for working with boys and girls during the early years must be *observational*, not experimental. The author devotes at least one chapter to each of the special strengths of work in the primary school: ideas about learning; relationships between what children experience with their senses and the media of expression called "painting" and "talking"; exploration of mathematical ideas; the confident use of books for study, for enriching imagination, and for extension of awareness of feelings; the use of writing as a mediator between private experiences and understanding; the deliberate intent of teachers to place children's written work "in the mainstream of the class's shared communication"; the importance

¹ Ralph J. Hallmann, "Principles of Creative Teaching," *Readings On Creativity and Imagination in Literature and Language*, p. 66. Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968.

of flexible and fluid activities, groups, and learning patterns; the teacher's sensitive control over use of space, choice and display of materials, and involvement of children in the process of choice; the remarkable working relationships between the head and members of his staff, all concerned with the *process* of education; and the pattern of relationships with the local, as well as the professional, community.

All of these descriptions serve as excellent bases for reflection and discussion of basic understandings that guide educational practices. In the spirit of Piaget, pervasive throughout the whole book, is the image of the teacher alongside the child, as observer, as evaluator of children's responses to situations, as "coach or guide rather than as dispenser of goods."² One senses, too, that flexibility of curriculum in no way precludes structure, that "open" programs constantly "stress the thinking process rather than the content of a particular curriculum."³

Mr. Marsh's account of learning in the British primary school sounds amazingly like the creative process described by Wilma McNess when she says:

. . . self-led learning . . . something overwhelmingly simple; it "gets in by itself" when everyone in the room opens his mind and his heart and wonders and questions and wonders.⁴

This willingness on the part of pupils and teachers alike to engage in self-led, self-fed activities, in a setting that is conducive to their combined efforts, is crucial to teaching and learning in the open classroom, and to the ultimate goal: an autonomous functioning of the pupil's personality.

² Hans G. Furth, *Piaget for Teachers*, p. 150. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1970.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁴ Wilma McNess, "Creativity in the Classroom," *Readings On Creativity in Literature and Language*, p. 76. Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968.