
Multimedia Review

August to June: Bringing Life to School (2011)

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"It's one thing to deplore the assembly-line model of schooling with its emphasis on mindless compliance and rote memorization. Far more useful is to see the alternative take shape in front of you."

-- Alfie Kohn, author of *The Schools Our Children Deserve*



August to June: Bringing Life to School (<http://augusttojune.com/>) is an informative and engaging 90-minute documentary about Amy Valen's last year of teaching (2006) in a K-6 open classroom in San Geronimo, Marin County, California. Amy's K-8 rural school district, 30 miles north of San Francisco, offers four different philosophies of teaching to 290 students and their families: a progressive middle school, Waldorf, Montessori, and a British Open Classroom model.

Open Classroom Overview

Amy is a teacher in a combined 3rd and 4th grade of 26 students. She believes the most basic responsibility of a teacher is to "reach students and keep



them engaged.” Her classroom is the embodiment of everything positive in a British style open classroom. The term “open classroom” is a misnomer resulting from confusing an open space with open learning. While the physical space may appear unimpeded without desks, there is a subculture of self-control and productivity for what the British refer to as the Integrated Working Day.

Amy’s open space emphasizes a deep appreciation and profound understanding of diversity in its generic form. Values and mores are taught, modeled, explained, and reinforced to ensure that each student receives a mega dose of confidence, independence, creativity, curiosity, responsibility, perseverance, communication skills, parental involvement, and academic success. The question of “how intelligent you are” is changed to “how you are intelligent” by drawing out each child’s multiple intelligences.

Educators, students, and parents teach, learn, communicate, and grow together in a community setting. Parent volunteers and community members support art, music, science, world languages, computers, and movement classes. Parents want their children to attend school in a creative and non-



competitive setting. The school received a waiver from the State of California Department of Education exempting students from standardized testing. Children’s growth is monitored by observation and one-on-one conferencing. Twice a year students have a major academic and social progress conference

with their teacher and parents. These conferences generate oral and written evaluations; letter grades are not assigned. Students develop and post a daily plan of what they intend to study, learn, and accomplish. Failure to meet their learning goals results in a conference with a teacher or classroom aide to inquire what happened to the student’s focus. Students maintain a writing log, math log, science log, spelling book, and other records of their academic activities, which serve as formative and summative assessments.

The school year begins with a democratic class council generating classroom agreements for the year. Every voice is heard by limiting speech to the person who is holding the stuffed white rabbit. Suggestions are discussed, and a



vote determines whether a proposal becomes a school agreement of behavior. There is great emphasis on reaching consensus. Misbehavior has rapid consequences. A violation of a school rule requires more than offering a simple apology. The parties must meet and share their feelings to avoid a recurrence of a hurtful action. Listening to each student and accepting what he or she says as serious dialogue helps to reduce social conflict. Resolving conflict and accepting others are continuous activities. Students, some from diverse cultural backgrounds, join the class throughout the school year, and it is the responsibility of other students to induct them into the social milieu. Teachers listen to student voices to ensure that their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs are met in a supportive, open, and caring environment.



Being one with nature is accomplished by keeping chickens, rabbits, and a large garden next to the school. Produce and eggs are gathered and consumed. Students are responsible for the care and feeding of the animals, planting, maintaining the garden, and harvesting. Volunteers teach life skills such as sewing, cooking, carpentry, and gardening. The curriculum is based on educating the whole child as espoused by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a Swiss educational reformer.



Creative arts are intertwined into every



school activity. The open spaces are festooned with students' artworks. One of Amy's favorite assignments is the self-portrait. Once a month her combined 3rd and 4th grade classes complete a self-portrait in a different medium. This multi-media approach to self-expression helps children reflect on how they feel over the school year and adds another important dimension to the integrated working day.

August to June is more than an overview of a school year in an open classroom. The video is divided into 14 themed chapters containing digestible five-minute vignettes which can help educators transfer pedagogy into their classroom and school. Sample chapter headings include: First Problem Solving; Conferences; Playing, Social Dynamics; Signs of Growth; Portraits; and Parents and hands-on activities.

Conclusion

Viewing *August to June: Bringing Life to School* is an uplifting emotional and cognitive experience. It renews one's faith in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) assertion that "every child is born good and it is the responsibility of adults to draw this goodness out." The video is replete with credible and engaging evidence that an open classroom can meet learning objectives based on the common core learning standards and that effective assessment can be personalized and individualized. Teachers believe there are many ways for students to demonstrate an understanding of core subjects. This video earns a 9.5 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding educational standards in expressing social conditions; engaging dialogue, self-reflection, transformational education; and the mechanics of cinematography, dialogue, pacing, sound, music, location, and editing.

Educational Resources:

Open Classroom Model Schools in the United States

Chugach Optional Elementary School, Anchorage, AK

http://www.asdk12.org/schools/chugach_optional/pages/Chugach_Optional_Web_site/Home.html

Corridor Alternative Elementary School, Eugene, OR

http://www.corridor.4j.lane.edu/Corridor_Website/Welcome.html

Open Classroom Public Charter, Salt Lake City, UT

<http://ocslc.org/>

Jefferson County Open School, Lakewood, CO

<http://sc.jeffco.k12.co.us/education/school/school.php?sectionid=27870>

Lewis Open Magnet Elementary School, Wichita, KS

<http://lewis.usd259.org/>

Open World Learning Community, Saint Paul, MN

<http://open.spps.org/>

The Open Classroom at Lincoln Elementary, Madison, WI

<https://midvalelincolnweb.madison.k12.wi.us/openclass2>

Breckinridge Franklin Elementary School, Louisville, KY
<http://www.jefferson.k12.ky.us/schools/elementary/breck-frank.html>

Key Learning Community, Indianapolis, IN
<http://www.616.ips.k12.in.us/>

Ann Arbor Open School, Ann Arbor, MI
<http://aaopen.a2schools.org/aaopen.home/home>

Arts Based Elementary School, Winston-Salem, NC
<http://www.wsabes.net/>

Mantua Elementary School, Fairfax, VA
<http://www.fcps.edu/MantuaES/>

Mission Hill Pilot School, Boston, MA
<http://www.missionhillschool.org/>

Central Park East 1 Elementary School, New York City
<http://www.centralparkeastone.org/>

Muscota New School PS 314, New York City
<http://www.muscota.org/>

Photo Credit

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