

Lurching from Fad to Fad

The open plan schools were but one costly craze in a long list.

by James F. McDonald

Ontario's publicly-funded school system made major, costly mistakes during the past 30 years, due in part to a lack of common sense. One of its costliest and silliest mistakes was the construction of hundreds of open plan elementary schools throughout the province. In keeping with the Ministry's pedagogy of joy philosophy, school boards built new schools with enormous playpen learning environments containing six to eight multi-grade classes in each of several large open area pods. At the time, there was not one shred of evidence that this physical arrangement would result in enhanced academic achievement. In fact, common sense — since confirmed — dictated that this was a really stupid way to house young children for instructional purposes. But trustees and education officers were not interested in common sense. This was the newest fad, and so they eagerly scrambled aboard the open plan bandwagon to be in the forefront of modern educational innovation.

For classroom teachers, the open plan classroom was akin to positioning a newly-designed open cockpit of a 747 jet in the passenger compartment surrounded by 250 exuberant, noisy customers and ordering the pilot to fly the plane with patience, empathy and skill. For many children, it was a loud, chaotic, confusing nightmare. Teacher stress levels rose dramatically, mainly because of the noise, the interruptions,

and the confusion of housing so many children in one space. Diverse teaching styles, effective in self-contained classrooms, often proved inappropriate in this throng of lively youngsters. Some special programs had to be radically altered or moved into storerooms in order to contain the noise level. Talk about stacking the cards to ensure teacher and student failure!

It wasn't long before distraught teachers appeared in droves at principals' doors pleading for walls or partitions to deaden the sound, lessen the confusion and lower the stress level of teaching young children in this mass of humanity. Gradually, the gurus at head office were forced to eat crow, admit defeat and order the erection of partitions or permanent walls to fashion self-contained classrooms out of the giant playpens. This, of course, was done at enormous cost, much like renovating the interior of a house after it had just been built. While these revamped classrooms resolved many of the glaring problems, the renovated make-shift interiors were seldom very satisfactory. They often resembled the work of a home handyman using the blueprints of a mad architect.

Thoughtful parents and skeptical teachers and principals were always mystified by the logic behind this really silly and costly educational experiment, but they were seldom consulted when these visually-beautiful white elephants were being planned and constructed. Most teachers knew better than to voice their serious misgivings. Educational leaders are big on group-think and tend to show displeasure towards lowly dissenters who express minority views.

This whole sorry fiasco would have fizzled had someone locked the board officials in the very first open plan school with 600 young students. Most of the education experts from the board offices would not have survived a week in the chaotic educational jungle. The scheme would have died in its tracks, thus saving taxpayers millions and millions of dollars. It would have relieved teachers and students of much anguish and stress. Instead, open plan schools spread like a plague across Ontario and North America before anyone could halt the trendy educational fad.

It is only recently that this bad idea has lost favour with some school boards. Common sense finally did force many officials to discard the open plan concept, but only because they were ready to move on to the next expensive bandwagon — computers. A wonderfully glitzy idea, requiring mega tax bucks. Perfect for the purpose.

(Dr. McDonald was an Ontario principal for 20 years and, for three of those years, he had to cope with an open plan school.)