To Have Or Not To Have

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By Dave Perkins

Remember those balmy days in April when you looked out the window at school and only heard the teacher's voice as though it were in the distance, background of your thoughts? Perhaps you were more impressed by two birds who were rather noisily jockeying for a position on the same branch or you couldn't watch that big truck coming down the street — or other classes out for recess looked as though they were having the most fun. At any rate, the subject of windows or "no windows" has become a topic of growing debate among architects and educators today.

Promoted by the growing number of windowless schools which have been designed and constructed lately, Britannica's Library Research Center released a bulletin in which the pros and cons of these schools have been analyzed by teachers and others who have been associated with the comfort of air. Proves that there are valid points made by both factions.

Easier Teaching

On the affirmative side, there seems to be two main assets that windowless schools automatically provide, supplemented by a wide assortment of lesser advantages. In general, teachers have found that schools without windows make teaching easier and more effective because the students, not distracted by what is going outside, are more attentive and absorb information more quickly. Another major value is that savings from schools constructed without windows amount to more than the cost of air-conditioning equipment and it is, therefore, economically feasible to provide the children with the comfort of air-conditioning without overspending the budget. A comfortable environment is usually one that is more conducive to learning.

Fringe benefits of the windowless schools include no dust, grit, drafts, overheating from constant annoyance of adjusting shades or opening and closing the windows. Teachers particularly enjoy the ease with which visual aids can be used in windowless classrooms. These rooms can be darkened instantly. They also provide extra wall space for displays and pictures. The elimination of glare makes for more freedom in seating arrangements and less eyestrain. Windowless walls provide better sound control, too.

Preclude Problem

Since plate glass and baseballs seem to have an affinity for one another, principals are impressed with schools without windows because they preclude the problem of replacing busted windows. Though lights must be used constantly in windowless schools, it is often necessary to use them anyway in schools with windows because natural lighting often doesn't benefit the entire classroom. There is, therefore, no appreciable difference in electricity costs.

The opposite point of view holds two big aces as arguments against windowless schools. One is the indisputable fact that under emergency conditions, windows do provide a ready escape. Secondly, there is a school of thought that education in "windowless boxes" just might have an adverse emotional effect on the youngsters involved. Only time and testing would provide any conclusive evidence on this theory. Research up until now doesn't indicate any emotional impairment.

Other Advantages

But, there are other advantages to classrooms with windows that can't be overlooked. Besides providing fresh air and a view to divert tired eyes from the tension of concentrated use in the classroom, windows give distinct educational opportunities, that many teachers feel offset the distractions. They enable the children to take an active part in weather study, such as temperature changes, storm conditions and seasonal variations. Windows provide the perfect atmosphere for watching nature and they reveal the interesting habits of birds and squirrels. They also lend the right environment for growing plants and give the children a chance to watch them sprout and bloom and take an active part in their maintenance.

As with all other phases of life in a democratic society, windowlessness in the classroom is no exception and will draw opposing schools of thought. "To have or not to have" window seems destined to be a big topic for consideration among architects and educators in the future.