

SOUTHBANK INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL: A SCHOOL WITHOUT WALLS

The inspiration for the concept of a school without walls came from the book, *The School Without Walls* by John Bremer.

It tells the story of the Parkway Program in Philadelphia. The program was set up in the late sixties in response to the appalling state of public education in Philadelphia at the time.

The idea was that the school would not have a single physical site, but instead the entire Benjamin Franklin Parkway would be its campus.

When we were setting up Southbank International School in 1979 we were not of course responding to the dire state of education here, but we did feel that London itself was an incomparable resource. At the time the educational programmes of most galleries and museums were very underdeveloped. By basing ourselves in central London we had easy access to them. But it wasn't simply museums and galleries that were available. The whole of the South Bank complex was within a few minutes walk of our little building in Waterloo. The National Theatre in particular proved a very valuable space, because its acres of lobbies and corridors were clean, comfortable and above all empty. So we often conducted classes and seminars there without anyone ever questioning our presence there. Without labs we arranged to use the well equipped labs of what is now South Bank University. Where we couldn't offer a course, for example in music or certain languages, we arranged for students to take these at institutions like Morley College or the City Lit. We also drew on experts and professionals to teach courses or classes in their own specialities.

All of this helped to create a particularly dynamic and exciting programme. Many students responded with enthusiasm at being treated as young adults, responsible to a large degree for their own learning. Others found the freedom too tempting. Most teachers also enjoyed the challenge and the opportunity of trying something different.

This sort of programme is a white knuckle ride. It's exhilarating, but those with weak stomachs find it too scary. It demands a lot of confidence and a lot of trust on the part of the faculty and parents. Those who always like to be in control would find it too difficult. It involves risk, but then all human advances do.

Gradually, as the school grew, as pressure increased for measurable results, as the practical difficulty of keeping so many balls in the air simultaneously exceeded our juggling skills, more order was introduced. It's a fact of history that pioneers and explorers eventually settle down, and that's what we did.

But the idea of a school without walls is not confined to the physical environment. Indeed, I would say that the most important walls to escape from are those that surround our minds. Those are the walls that prevent us from seeing, and more importantly experiencing what goes on outside.

So I believe that a school without walls is really a state of mind, Even when Southbank became a more settled, stable place, the most important thing that we tried to preserve – I hope with some success – was an openness to the outside world, a readiness to see other points of view, and an acceptance of people who may be different from ourselves. A school without walls means that we know that we don't know everything, we are constantly in search of knowledge, we are not afraid of something new or different, we are willing to risk failure. It means not always going for the easy option.

By Milton E Toubkin, Founding Headteacher of Southbank International School