

Letters from Abroad

Column Editor: Carleton W. Washburne
Contributor: Ernesto Codignola

Professor Ernesto Codignola is perhaps the leading authority in Italy on newer educational methods. He is a professor at the University of Florence, is a member of the Board of Directors of the International Federation of Children's Communities, is president of the Italian section of the New Education Fellowship, and was the founder of the activity school described in this article.

Carleton W. Washburne

Experiments on Active School Methods in Italy

IN THE FERVOR of the reconstruction work that has followed the cessation of hostilities in several of the European countries caught in the avalanche of the war, the way spontaneously opened for new educational experiments which the emergency demanded: such experiments, in a scholastic regime so centered and bureaucratic as the Italian and French would otherwise have been considered utopian and impossible of realization.

The element of originality common to all such attempts was the idea—which generally professional teachers are reluctant to accept—that pupils must be taught in their own and not in our language; that the start must be made from their actual needs and experiences and not from school programs; that it is the teacher who must place himself on the pupil's plane if he wants to lift him to a higher, more abundant and comprehensive level. Programs, syntheses must come afterwards instead of being taken as starting points. All who, soon after the close of the conflict, devoted themselves to assisting and rehabilitating the children and adolescents whom the war had dehumanized, whom the atmosphere of insecurity and violence had humbled and led astray by hardship and sometimes by turpitude, intuitively per-

ceived that traditional methods of discipline and education would have proved inefficient for anyone who had tasted the bitter but attractive fruit of unrestricted freedom and had learned to shift for himself, even in the hardest contingencies, using his own means and resources.

The special institutions which arose in that critical period and which adopted unusual names, like "children's villages," "school cities," "boys towns," "children's republics" and so forth, were guided mainly by this conception and sought to organize themselves into communities (which later, in 1948, were united under the *Fédération des Communautés d'enfants* or F.I.C.E.) established on self-government and on active processes of education and instruction. The outcome of these initiatives varied greatly. Some did not take root: once the first enthusiasm abated, they collapsed under the financial, bureaucratic, political and religious difficulties that immediately confronted them; others were transformed into professional institutions or simple welfare organizations. But there were some which intended to go steadily through the experiment and to attempt, on a small scale, a structural reform of the traditional school, a reform that might better harmonize it with the progress

made by psychology and pedagogy and render it more adequate to the requirements of contemporary civilization, so different from the civilization out of which came the European primary and elementary school.

The Pestalozzi School City of Florence

I shall devote only a few words to illustrate one of these projects: The Pestalozzi School City of Florence, founded by myself, my wife and our assistants towards the end of 1944, soon after the Germans left the place, with the fires of its ruins still smoking.

The institution is situated in Piazza Santa Croce, a district of Florence of the worst reputation. The pupils (about 140, from 6 to 15 years of age), generally show the least promising physiological and psychological heredity: a sickly body and a heritage of physical and moral misery are all they have to build on.

We have organized them into a community that has learned to govern itself. Of course, at the beginning, we had to meet serious difficulties, but little by little the environment of cooperation and freedom won the confidence of teachers, pupils and parents. It may be affirmed that now the school constitutes a sound block of resistance and instructors and scholars work of their own free will in close cooperation.

The numerous visitors from abroad do not fail to note with satisfaction this characteristic atmosphere of relaxation and joy among the children; a miracle performed both by the tenderness surrounding them and by a method of education and instruction pivoted on individual initiative and on the forces inherent in human nature. Anything that is apt to arouse energy and personal interest is fostered in pupils and teachers. The community has thus become a beehive with no quarters for

the drones. Each one attends to his task and spontaneously controls himself in his effort to put his activity in gear with that of all others.

No law is imposed from above: every law is an unailing consequence of this life in common. It seems almost impossible that children who mostly grew up in the streets, during a regime of anarchy and lawless individualism, may in a few months so willingly conform to an almost inflexible discipline. This transformation is due to their discovering that laws are not something external which adults and "superiors" have devised, but an inevitable condition for any collective activity, from playground games to choral singing. The problems arising every day from the active exercise of the various functions of the community, discharged by pupils of both sexes—from kitchen work to singing and dancing contests, from the administration of the mutual benefit fund to the organization of the health center—have helped much in creating in the children this awareness, which has also been encouraged by other means: for instance, through the "giunta"—a representative group whereby the children directly participate in the government of their little city and help solve its daily controversies—as well as the "court of honor" which examines the most serious violations of the laws and rules of the community. The children, who themselves elect their representatives in the "giunta" and "court of honor" take these institutions very seriously and in using them sharpen their moral feelings and legal perception, increase their acumen in judging and obtain a vivid idea of the limitations that social life demands from us in our activities. Also in the field of specific instruction, they see to it that action goes first and reflection follows the fact.

Teaching never consists in a mere transplanting, or indoctrination of ideas. The whole life of the community aims in fact at awakening the intellectual powers and at giving concrete answers to the persisting questioning

of the pupils. In due time, the order of knowledge which official programs so constantly pursue will come of itself, the goal of the process which the children have followed in all its various phases.

Curriculum Research

Column Editor: C. W. Hunnicutt
Contributor: Paul W. Eberman

Personal Relationships: One Key to Instructional Improvement

THE CONCEPT of "teacher acceptance" has long been regarded in educational literature as being an important factor in the learning and development of children in school. Discussions of this concept, however, emphasize different things. For some, the emphasis is on "group dynamics" and on roles played by group participants;¹ others play up the importance of patterns of interaction and differentiate them on such bases as the degree to which teachers exhibit democratic or autocratic practices in the classroom.²

Three objections may be raised to most studies of this kind: (a) They tend to concentrate on a single factor affecting classroom climate and to deal with it in isolation from other equally important factors; (b) too often the definition of the factor under scrutiny is a highly abstract one, making it difficult

to translate conclusions into concrete directives for actual behavior on the part of those directly concerned with instructional programs. The study here described³ is an attempt to meet these objections to some degree.

The point of view taken is that teacher acceptance of children is primarily the product of the personal-social relationships involved; that classroom relationships are primarily those which have to do with the interaction of teacher with pupils and of pupils with pupils; and that the quality of such relationships is best seen in terms of actual behaviors, with such behaviors being examined in relation to each other. Teacher acceptance is defined, therefore, as a pattern of behavior in dealing with children in which there is a predominance of positive and supportive action. Teacher rejection is defined as the reverse of this condition.

To make this definition concrete, large numbers of items describing both positive and negative teacher behavior in dealing with children were collected through direct analysis of many class-

¹ R. B. Haas, *Psychodrama and Sociodrama in American Education*. New York: Beacon House, 1949.

² Ronald Lippitt and Ralph White, "The Social Climate of Children's Groups," *Child Behavior and Development*, R. G. Barker, pp. 485-508. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1943.

Ruth Cunningham and others, *Understanding Group Behavior of Boys and Girls*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1951.

³ P. W. Eberman, "The Application of Q-technique to One Aspect of Teaching Competency". Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Education, University of Chicago, 1950.

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