

Letters to the Editor

Contributors:
Rachel Bodoh and
John Sternig

European vs. American Education

Hibbing, Minnesota
December 17, 1959

Editor

Educational Leadership

Dear Sir:

The past five years have probably produced more references to the relative merits of European education vs. American than the previous 50. Unfortunately, what we see in print, and hear via public speeches, radio and television, is contradictory, even highly controversial. Most American administrators who are eager to visit their European counterparts and see representative schools, do not have such a privilege, since their jobs prevent them from being away during the winter when schools are in session. A lucky 20, however, had such an experience last winter when they were selected to participate in the first Fulbright Seminar in Comparative Education. As a member of the group, my enthusiasm ran high, for now (I thought) I would be able to see at firsthand how other countries deal with their problems, perhaps gain new insights into solving some of our own and learn at last the *real* truth about European education.

It was a naive assumption. True, I saw a lot and did get many impressions. But a more sophisticated outlook would have

prepared me for reality: the 20 who made up our group saw the same events in 20 different lights. I was often surprised in our "bull sessions" at other group members' interpretation of common experiences, and have been even more surprised at what I have seen in print since our return. And so the fable of the three blind men and the elephant seems more apropos than ever!

In fact, it is only after firmly establishing the point that anything I say is only one person's opinion that I am willing to discuss my views of the Seminar. Seven weeks spent in three countries did not produce an expert!

I thoroughly enjoyed Arthur Foshay's recent article (October 1959) on the changes that are being made in French education. I must admit, though, that I do not share his optimism about the speed with which those changes will be made.

It is true that the French have recently extended their compulsory education law to age 16; but it is also true that this extension does not become effective until this year's entering first graders *become* 16. It is also true that exciting things are happening at the experimental school at Sèvres and at some of the experimental classes in the Provinces. However, my own feeling was that Sèvres flourished as a monument to

Madame Hatinguais, its founder, at least in part because she had the status of Inspector General; can someone *without* similar status in the centralized organization of France be similarly successful in maintaining the school and extending its influence? I thought her to be the most remarkable person we met in France, and I sincerely hope she lives a long, long time!

It is also true that the national "leaving examination" has been discontinued at the end of the primary school. However, the French officials who met with us at the Sorbonne at the end of two weeks in Paris were unhappy with this change, and hoped to restore the examination. At a meeting of French education leaders, headed by M. Jacob, Inspector General of the Academie of Paris, the statement, "Forty percent of those who enter secondary schools are ill prepared," sounded very much like home! Unlike Dr. Foshay,

I feel that it will take years to make much of a dent in the system that was established by Napoleon.

Belgium, on the other hand, while still having a centralized organization was actively engaged *at the top level* in educational change. Much was heard about "active" methods and "self-government," a term for which there seems to be no equivalent in either French or Flemish, since the English term was used in the educational literature of both languages. It was interesting to me, however, that "democratizing" education was coming from the top down, as a decree!

In Holland there were evidences on all sides of change in emphasis. The Dutch have a great many concerns and are industriously seeking answers to their educational problems. One of their concerns is the high mortality rate in education. Only about half of their children go on to *any* form of secondary education.

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When asked what happens to the other half, the answer was, "They just get lost. Nobody knows."

This, of course, is an overstatement. They *do* go into the labor market but their formal education for the most part ceases, albeit there are extensive night school offerings at vocational schools. Some Dutch educators are taking a long look at our comprehensive high school as a means of salvaging some of this loss.

The Dutch are also concerned with the rigor of their classical high schools. They estimate that an IQ of 120 is required for entrance; of the ten percent of the teenage population who enter, only about five percent finally graduate. A modern language teacher in Haarlem made the statement, "The most refined torture system yet invented by civilized man is the Dutch High School!"

At a final summary session with the Dutch educators we had met, one who had spent some time in our country said, "The constant fear of the Dutch teenager is that he will not be intelligent enough; the constant fear of the American teenager is that he will not be popular enough!"

To me, the most interesting facet of Dutch education was the change in emphasis on teaching methods. They are intensely interested in methods that will give children training in *how to think*.

Dalton and Montessori schools, with children working on some type of contract plan are very popular. We were told that World War II was responsible for this change. During the Occupation it was discovered that the best educated people in many instances were the first to cooperate with the Germans. As the Dutch looked critically at this phenomenon, they decided that they were doing too good a job of training their children to follow directions! They needed

to devise an educational method that would produce more self-reliant and critically minded students. But since examinations are omnipresent, many feel there is still too much emphasis on acquisition of facts at the expense of the interpretation of those facts.

Impressions

How can all these impressions be distilled into ideas applicable for our schools? Again, the conclusions are subjective, but here they are:

1. There may be a danger in making the teacher *too* secure. Is there perhaps a ratio between security and creativity? It is almost impossible for a *teacher* to inject any new idea into the French system. Is there a *real* advantage in being a civil servant?

2. The plan we saw in operation in Paris of sending a whole class to the mountains for a month of skiing and other outdoor activity along with regular class instruction seemed to be a delightful one. If we were willing, as the French are, to spend ten percent of our national income for education, we could finance such ventures in our crowded cities.

3. University education in France costs very little. We have not done so well in our country in making higher education available to those of limited means.

4. Our teacher shortage could be decreased by adopting a plan we saw in action at teacher training institutions in France whereby the teachers in training were subsidized by the government in exchange for spending six years in the teaching profession.

5. While emphasis on languages such as we saw in Holland is not as yet the vocational necessity with us that it is

with the Dutch, it is certainly essential to the improvement of international understanding and we would do well in this country to extend our foreign language offerings.

6. The idea that keeps plaguing me, however, is the difference in interpretation of the term "leadership" in western Europe and the United States. We often were told, when discussing the difference in aims of education, that their aim was to give a classical education (with all that it entails) only to the most able students so that they might become "leaders" of their country. Unfortunately, we are getting more and more public pressure in this country for just this type of education. I fervently hope and believe that we shall always be committed in this country to education for *all* children, the followers as well as the leaders. There is a story applicable here about an old goat who was trained in the Chicago stockyards to lead the cattle up to slaughter. Just before entering the slaughter house, a side door would open

for him, and he would go back for another group. Outsiders called him "Judas" but the workmen in the stockyards called him "Leader."

The European Seminar has forced me to re-examine my concept of leadership in education and to do some soul-searching of my own into my concept of the function of education. Any system of education in any country is of necessity a reflection of the basic culture, the important beliefs of its people. There are features of all the systems we visited which would, indeed, enhance our own. But would any American steeped in democratic traditions want to change our basic cultural pattern to conform to that of our European neighbors?

Sincerely,

Rachel Bodoh
Director, Elementary
Education
Independent School District
No. 701
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Comment on a Review

Glencoe, Illinois
January 26, 1960

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

I am writing to you because of a book review which was carried in the November 1959 issue of the Journal. The book is Philo Pritzkau's *Dynamics of Curriculum Improvement*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959.

We bought the book for our Glencoe Professional Library when it first came out and I sent Dr. Pritzkau a comment

about it. I was favorably impressed with it and was interested to see that your reviewer approached it from quite a different point of view than I and therefore reached somewhat different conclusions.

Perhaps you might be interested in my reactions to the book though they too are not necessarily a final judgment. Professional books strike readers differently, depending on the backgrounds and experiences which are brought to them and what they look for.

To me the book was novel in its ap-

proach. It deals with dynamics rather than mechanics or statistics. I warmed up to its significant handling of the inner values which are the soul of the curriculum in action. In my opinion the author used a fresh, creative approach in developing an organization which deals with basic ideas without becoming mired down in details. It gives the reader credit for bringing something to the book before he takes it up and yet keeps him comfortable by permitting him to "act within his limitations," as one section puts it. For me the book was new and different for the very reasons your reviewer found it lacking. No doubt both viewpoints can be justified and this is why I am writing to present mine.

Sincerely,

John Sternig
Public Schools
Glencoe, Illinois

frames for the children's art work which is changed periodically. Beautiful art work done by the children adds much to a school building.

The Task Ahead

As we look at the task ahead in education, the problem of space utilization will not be lessened. Instead, with our increasing enrollment, more teachers must strive to find better ways of using present space. As we see how some creative teachers are improving their classrooms, it should inspire others to experiment and discover new ways of their own. Only through boldness and persistence on the part of school personnel will the quality of education continue to improve. It is the hope of all, especially the parents, that the challenge will be met in the most effective way possible.

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Space

(Continued from page 419)

the wainscoting could be used as attractive teaching spaces. Similar space on the walls of the cafeteria, auditorium, and other parts of the building could be used as teaching space. In Central Elementary School in Albemarle, North Carolina, each room assumes responsibility for a section of the wall in the cafeteria for a display of art which serves not only as a teaching area but also does much to enhance the beauty and livability of the cafeteria. Both teachers and children take pride in the art exhibits. Also, hanging in the halls are picture

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