The 1992 meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) coincided with the 400th anniversary year of Comenius, yet he was not mentioned in the program, and only one paper referred to him at all. Why, at the world’s largest educational conference, should so little attention be paid to a person who has been characterized as "the greatest educationalist who ever lived"? The best guess that Professor Gundem, in the article preceding this one, offers for this peculiarity is that Comenius's main ideas have become so much a part of our presuppositions about education that we have nothing left to argue about in the way that people still argue about Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey. Another reason worth considering is that it is difficult to read Comenius today and not conclude that he was a little nutty. He is reminiscent of a predecessor with not dissimilar ambitions and programs for universal peace and harmony whose reputation was widespread across Europe, and whose influence lasted for centuries, even today still claiming pockets of enthusiasts. Ramon Lull was a Catalan poet, inventor of the first computer (used for composing sermons), novelist, searcher for a basic universal language, promoter of a kind of pansophism, manic-depressive author of millions of words. Lull was another fantastically productive and immensely clever chilist who is now largely ignored. His work, like Comenius's, sits to the side of the canon of Western intellectual history, not because it was not influential and taken seriously by some of the primary canonical figures of this tradition, but because its grasp of practical realities and of human behavior seems somewhat awry.

Comenius is also difficult to read comfortably today because he inhabits a largely medieval world view. Despite his being among the vanguard to those 17th-century figures forging our modern consciousness, his pedagogical recommendations are immersed in the assumptions of a theocratic metaphys-
ics and tied into a kind of utopianism we have learned to be wary of. At times, Comenius seems to speak a modern language of empirical science and practical pedagogical proposals, but then upon further examination we find that these empirical and practical elements are tied into and are a product of a medieval millenarianism. This mixture, which seems confusing perhaps only in retrospect, was not so uncommon among leading members of the British Royal Society, that gathering of progressive minds that was the main force behind the development of empirical science. Such people as Robert Boyle and John Pell managed to combine the forging of new scientific methods with Rosicrucianism, but their science was not tied to their mystical beliefs the way that Comenius's work is.

Comenius's revolutionary proposals for educating every child, male and female, rich and poor, do not, for example, find justification in the kind of democratic impulses that finally led to the realization of this ideal in the West. Rather, he says that childhood is the best time to repair the human corruption that follows from man's fall from grace. His pedagogical reforms were driven by the belief that if everyone spoke the same language, disharmony and war would not exist, so his reforms were first directed toward ensuring that every child would learn Latin easily. When this proved unsuccessful in practice, he worked on a simplified Latin, and then on an artificial language in which each thing in the world would be represented by a single word. Simplifying language in this way was, he argued, "the antidote to the confusion of thought" and would lead to "the reform of the whole world." (Along with George Orwell in 1984, we might rather conclude that such a language is an antidote to thought.)

Once we look beneath the modern-sounding practical reforms, we run into a dizzying theoretical world bound in with some of the more exotic and unfruitful strains of medieval speculation. Even the Orbis Pictus, wildly successful in practice, is justified in terms of the Aristotelian principle that there is nothing in the mind that does not first pass through the senses. The medieval tag derived from this principle appears on the dedication page of The Great Didactic, but it is a principle long recognized as inadequate for explaining the workings of the mind.

The pansophism that was to be the fruit and flower of his system was to be achieved only by the more able students. That is, despite The Great Didactic's subtitle, "Setting Forth the Whole Art of Teaching All Things to All Men," Comenius recognized that teaching all to all does not mean that each will learn equally well. Moreover, his impulse to systematize leads not only to his peculiar notions of how language matches reality, but to similarly peculiar notions of how knowledge can be represented. Aristotle's ideas, for example,

---

5Johann Amos Comenius, The Way of Light, trans E T Campagnac (Liverpool University Press, 1938)
are not to be gained by reading Aristotle, but by reading précis of Aristotle's work. Comenius believed that the flavor, content, and style of the originals could be compressed into abbreviated forms and that these could be neatly conveyed into students' minds by means of his own super-efficient techniques.

Comenius presented his pedagogical reforms in the form of analogies involving technological developments. He likened teaching, which he viewed as a technical skill, to the workings of the printing press. Teachers should prepare to write their lessons on children's minds, he said, in a way much like printers prepare to arrange bits of iron to print a thousand sheets a day. The whole process "will be as free from friction as is the movement of a clock... It will be as pleasant to see education carried out on my plan as to look at an automatic machine... and the process will be as free from failure as are those mechanical contrivances when skillfully made." Often, Comenius's analogies are so excessive, they seem to take over his writing. The analogy of the printing press runs to over six pages, instead of paper, we have children's minds; instead of type, textbooks, instead of ink, the teacher's voice, instead of the press, discipline, and so on. This sense of being taken over by an analogy (common also in Ramon Lull) is evident in his conclusion that the more students an individual teacher has, the better. He was no advocate of small classes. If the technique was well designed, skillfully made, then it would lead to uniform production of knowledge in students' minds, whether there were 5 students or 50 students.

If these observations capture something of why Comenius is little read in the English-speaking world today, is there something wrong with viewing him this way? If we properly appreciated his work, would his name appear regularly on the AERA program, at least as an honored point of reference for much of modern theorizing and research? After all, is his search for teaching methods that would induce learning "free from friction" fundamentally different from the ideas that have driven aptitude-treatment interaction of learning styles research? Are his theoretical principles not the origin of the dominant methods of teaching that we do, in fact, take largely for granted today? And is suggesting that his contribution is "merely" methodological, as Professor Gundem complains, an inappropriate diminution of Comenius's proper stature in the educational canon?

Let us look at some of those methodological contributions. They include the principle that sense experience should precede verbal instruction, contradicting, among others, Erasmus. This principle comes, again, from the belief that all knowledge reaches the mind through the senses. And while this raw empiricism is generally recognized as inadequate today, the importance of experience in learning is taken for granted. The problem is that the theoretical

---


"Ibid., p 446 ff
support offered by Comenius is itself no longer taken seriously, let alone for granted. If the principle is asserted, defended, or modified today, discussion will likely be in terms of Rousseau's or Dewey's justification for it. The raw pedagogical recommendations are not very meaningful by themselves. They must be accompanied by reasons, justifications, or theoretical superstructures that enable us to use them appropriately and successfully in varied educational circumstances.

Comenius's principle for organizing learning by taking the student by gradual, logical steps from the simple to the complex, ensuring a very thorough foundation before moving on, is certainly common currency today. And Comenius's insistent articulation of this principle very likely influenced John Locke. Locke is more commonly cited as the author of this principle, largely because the theoretical structure in which he situates it is one more readily recognized as central to the tradition of educational ideas that has led to our current beliefs and practices. And yet, if this principle is cited in an AERA paper, its more likely reference is to some modern progressivist. Is this just another case of modern educationalists being largely ignorant of the sources of most of the ideas in their heads? Perhaps not. In the writings of both Locke and Comenius, the above principle is connected with theories about how units of perception are carried by the imagination to the mind, where their combinations lead to complex ideas. The theoretical support for the principle in their work would lead to practices that no longer make sense, because they would clash with principles derived from more modern and adequate theoretical formulations. For instance, we will not be attracted to methods of writing instruction that advocate first teaching lines, then curves, then circles, then how to join them to form letters, and so on. Reference to progressivist theories makes much more sense than references to Comenius and Locke in supporting the principle that we move from the simple to the complex. And similarly, if one wishes to refute that principle, it would be a waste of time refuting the theories Comenius uses in its support; it is Dewey and his followers one must refute.

(Professor Gundem notes that Comenius also recommended the principle of moving from the specific to the general, which is today commonly associated with moving from the simple to the complex and defended on similar grounds. But Comenius seems—from my no doubt much less adequate reading than Professor Gundem's—to argue for quite the opposite: "In the earlier schools everything is taught in a general and undefined manner, while in those that follow the information is particularized and exact, just as a tree puts forth more branches and shoots each successive year." This argument seems to be based on a psychological theory which claims that the

---

*Ibid., p 408*
Comenian's constant insistence that learning should be easy and pleasurable, that schools should be bright, clean, and attractive, with instructive pictures on the walls, that parents should prepare students for school by making clear that "learning is not labor, but that amusement with book and pen is sweeter than honey" is one of his more endearing and humanizing contributions to education. It is not a message unique to Comenius, of course, but he propounded it with energy and insistence. It is a principle of constant reformulation, to be sure. Plato recommends the use of games to teach elementary mathematics, in the manner long used by the Egyptians before him. A qualification one might reasonably have about Comenian's reassertion of the principle is his excessive confidence that his methods would surely lead to such honeyed, frictionless learning that children would pick up endless information with as much ease and pleasure as "going to fairs." Plato and Rousseau, it is hard to deny, show a more realistic grasp of the problems of learning.

In general, Professor Gundem argues that we will gain a better understanding of Comenian's educational ideas by coordinating them with his overarching philosophical ideas. While this would no doubt help understanding, I fear that it would also further encourage neglect of Comenius at the AERA. Professor Gundem is right in observing that many of the pedagogical principles Comenius propounded are now taken for granted, but tying them to his pansophistical superstructure only emphasizes that Comenius's principles are, in subtle ways, different from the seemingly similar principles we hold today. They belong to a different intellectual scheme because Comenius's reasons for proposing them are unlike our reasons for accepting them. Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey are among the greatest contemporary educational thinkers; we read them today—or ought to—for help in dealing with current educational questions. In reading Comenius, however, we may be engaged in little more than historical study.

Can we really consider Comenius "the greatest educationalist who ever lived"? People like Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey, who are more frequently mentioned at AERA meetings, are considered "great" educationalists because their work has contributed significantly to constructing or altering the conception of education we hold today, that is, what we presuppose we are about when educating has been affected significantly by their ideas. Although some
of the methodological innovations of Comenius, particularly those in the *Orbis Pictus*, have been widely influential, they are of a different order from the profound theoretical shifts, like tectonic events, that have been produced by those we more readily recognize as "great educationalists."

---

KIERAN EGAN is Professor of Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia V5A 186, Canada.

---


Thirty four lengthy articles make up this handbook published as a project of the American Educational Research Association. Part 1 (5 articles) deals with conceptual and methodological issues. Part 2 (11 articles) deals with how the curriculum is shaped by political, cultural, ideological, organizational, and economic forces. Part 3 (8 articles) examines the impact of the curriculum on students, pedagogy, and minorities. Part 4 (10 articles) examines issues within various subjects and extracurricular programs.

---


This book places 11 examples of studies using interpretive inquiry into three groups—the mythological/practical, the evolutionary/transformational, and the normative/critical. These examples of interpretive inquiry include classroom situations, policy making, administration, pre-service and in-service teacher education, and education law. At the close of each section of the book, the editors discuss each group of studies.

---


Authors of these eight articles discuss the place of technology as a subject and as pervading the new National Curriculum in England and Wales.

---


This publication contains the proceedings of the Sixth Triennial Conference of the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction held in 1989 in Noordwijdhout, The Netherlands. It includes conference addresses and plenary session presentations by speakers such as Norman Overly (WCCI President), Lea Dasberg (Israel), Elliot Eisner (USA), and Emmanuel Nicholas (Sri Lanka). It contains reports of creative curriculum practices from fifteen countries, three reflections on the curriculum development process, summaries of eight interest groups, and the names and addresses of all 250 conference participants.