

The heart of the citizenship education and the revival of New Schools in Europe¹

Sandra Chistolini², Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy

Hugo Verkest*, Vives University College campus Torhout, Belgium

Abstract

Our present time is characterised by many contradictions and the atmosphere of uncertainty gives a sense of our deep loss of values. Education is the traditional space in which generations create meanings and the adults prefigure the future. During our study trip in Flanders we investigated the reality of method schools in this region and in its capital city, Brussels. We could experience how these method schools are successful in developing a closely-knit community. Dalton, Jenaplan, Decroly and Freinet Schools are still alive and they create a new message of citizenship education coherent with the impulse of their founders. Citizenship education yearns to overcome the separations and borders between people and points out the road for peace and harmony. Circle time in the classroom is the genesis of democratic thinking. It is not just a coincidence that these Reform Schools reaffirm the original impulses. They are transforming the contradictions of our postmodern society into a flexible management of daily education. Headmasters and teachers are seriously opting for movement and variety of the curriculum instead of school stereotypes of disciplines. Children become protagonists of the reformation using the methodology of dialogue, development and discovery. Teachers and parents appear to be fundamental actors amid this learning process. Democracy at school starts with the practice of a council of pupils based on interactive methods, such as discussing, deciding and doing. The external world is investigated in an active and critical way. Citizenship education is composed by the biographies of senior citizens, mainly grandparents. The customs and narrative stories are cherished with proud, not at least by children with a migrant background.

¹ If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Chistolini, S. & Verkest, H. (2020). *The heart of the citizenship education and the revival of New Schools in Europe*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 433 - 440). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

² Authorship: Sandra Chistolini had the responsibility in writing the paper. Hugo Verkest revised the paper and completed the final section with proper testimonies, being leader of Academics in the one week guided visit to the nowadays Reform Schools in Belgium.

Introduction

The definition of uncertainty pursues that of indecision. The certainties of the past span the crisis of postmodernism. The relationship between modernism and postmodernism overcomes the concept of opposition and becomes a challenge to regain the depth of the sense of humanity in each of us. In modernism, the human mind did not encounter uncertainties but found a way to lead the great processes of the spirit and, indirectly, the great geopolitical formations back to unity. It was a time of grand ideologies, philosophies and religions founded, as Lyotard said, on metanarratives and great empires or nation states. It was a time governed by strong thinking, broad meaningful horizons and a calling that was a deep-rooted belief in what one was doing. Postmodernism is exactly the opposite: it is a time of weak thinking, a time of thinking based on small and multiple horizons and a time of the disintegration and crumbling of the great spiritual and geopolitical processes. Great ideologies, universal philosophies and rock-like religions no longer exist. Empires and Nations vacillate in search of lost identities. As Friedrich Hölderlin understood so well, postmodernism is the beginning of the theoretical and empirical break-up of a civilisation. During this ambivalent era of transition, everything is reduced to scale and is virtual. Specialisation breaks up the great conceptual frameworks. In its highest meaning of general cultural, the Greek 'paideia' disappears (Ferracuti, 2008). And yet, man always resurfaces, searching for a new way to see postmodernism that gives hope by overcoming illusions and is capable of releasing its humanist spirit.

The vision of the *Angelus Novus* that Walter Benjamin recovers from Paul Klee translates the emancipation of modern man. Looking back means not losing the past, it means looking at what happened in its entirety, of good and evil, it means drawing inspiration to build the future. Progress cannot be stopped and, thus, it is necessary to send its own strong messages created by great public figures to be able to redirect one's life and, through this, the world of interpersonal relations. History is not destruction, but teaching and remembering. In the vision of a new humanism, the past, present and future are simultaneous, because man knows how to rebuild the sense of himself, and the world in which he lives, from the fragments.

During this shift from illuminist trust to the search for new hope, what happens to education? What has happened to those ideas of renewal of the school that, during the second Millennium, had revolutionised the way of thinking about teaching and that had combined nature, science and culture so well? Which educational paradigm is more plausible today?

The theoretical paradigm of this research is the result of an original composition of the ethnomethodology using interactive personalism and the strategy known as *Decoding the Disciplines*, intended to guide learning by means of an in-depth analysis of the difficulties of the pupils (Morel 2013; Warren 2016; Pace 2017).

Educate despite uncertainty

The concept of fragment contains the idea of the difficulty of gathering meanings into a uniform entity. The meanings multiply and need new interpretations in order to be introduced into living situations that are essential for growth.

Among the fragments that arise in daily life, there is a separation between nature and culture, between the need for general human development and economic development; hence, the necessity to find paths of meaning that are able to re-establish a continuity between the environment and the person that creates feelings of belonging to that environment, starting from one's own biography. Among its main tasks, the school counts that of promoting an education full of meanings for the children; for this reason, teachers try to construct learning situations, in which communication between the outside and the inside is constant and is rekindled by the initiative of the pupils who relate positively to the educational proposal. To have independence and freedom internalised requires an educational process founded on a method of experimentation and verification.

Our research on the best practices for the modern school led us to brush up on the methods of the active school of the late 1800s, created by educators and scientists who knew how to observe natural childhood development in relation to planning educational activities and social progress.

To counter the subject of uncertainty, we sought experiences of educational certainty; to do this, we directed ourselves to what exists today, starting with Belgium, as a country, in which there are current new schools, situated in a space of reasonable proximity and easily reached.

The main objective of renewing education according to the pioneers of Pedagogy of the Reformation in Europa was precisely that of creating meanings, building ties, connecting contexts and permitting the steady flow of the spontaneous human growth process, transformed into a cultural product of the school and community. School of integration and joy. School of discovery and invention. School of community and active participation.

Driven by the academic knowledge of new Schools, we understood how to familiarise ourselves with the current status of the teaching situation in the Decroly School, the Dalton School, the Freinet School, the School that aspires to the method of the Jenaplan. During our trip in the month of February 2017, we were able to familiarise ourselves with the methods and appreciate the current implementations being adapted in environmental contexts in Belgium, between Brussels and the Flanders area.

The qualitative survey of the separate features of Method Schools involves ten investigative actions; namely, the tools for recognition in the field:

1. random choice of four method schools defined as community schools;
2. connection of the schools to well-known models of educational innovation;
3. semi-structured interviews with privileged observers represented by school rectors, teachers, parents and children;

4. observation of the school and classes during morning teaching activities;
5. reading of the scholastic material prepared for the teaching and made up of homework, drawing, physical activities, research and evaluation;
6. description of the activities by the children in spontaneous conversations, during which the task of the researchers was to bring out the 'what' that made that specific school a complete, full learning environment;
7. research on the specificity and difference of these schools in the education panorama of the European school;
8. connection of these schools to other innovative pedagogical experiences in operation in other countries and, specifically, in Italy;
9. persistence of the pedagogical legacy and awareness of the importance of the method;
10. interest in the preservation of the original model.

Renewal beyond memory

The *Weltanschauung* of teachers in the New Schools is recreated daily in contemporaneous experiences, inspired by the founders from which they take their name. Teachers at the Decroly School, the Freinet School, the Dalton School and the Jenaplan deeply believe in their work, to the point of considering it of crucial value that makes existence unique. Over the last 10 years, a noteworthy revival of Method Schools is being witnessed in Belgium.

In talks with persons running the school, one notes the tie that binds those who are continuing with the method and those who initiated it. The expertise of these teachers cannot be measured like university results or career successes, but rather the capacity to enter into the spirit of the project for renewing education and knowing how to invent school situations in keeping with the basic idea: give space to childhood, so that it grows in nature, experience and culture. In nature, according to the needs of the person for gradual development and contexts of unity between the school and community. In experience, according to educational opportunities of contact with things, animate and inanimate objects that add to the environment. In community, for the contribution of families and persons, who live close to the school and understand its importance for preservation and improvement.

The renewal work that began with Ovide Decroly (1871-1932), Peter Petersen (1884-1952), Helen Parkhurst (1887-1973) and Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) requires a single-minded passion for teaching. The faith in the liberating activity of the child who experiments and self-educates is a feature common to all these experiences.

The Ecole de l'Ermitage in Brussels is in the same building, in which Decroly worked and the physician's living quarters still preserve the material for working with both children and teachers. The original documents collect the perceptions of the language and development of the child. One can see how careful, localised observation was at the basis of the scientific arrangement. The workbooks of the

students of the Ecole de l'Ermitage shows what was meant by the global method of learning from literature and writings, through word and phrase. From the phase of global perception, one moves to the phase of experimental observation, hereby collecting data that open up teaching to scientific discussion. Just as Decroly used films and documentaries about the daily life of the school, perfected the active method and explained how to follow the interests of the child, so, also, do the children of the Ermitage now describe their experience of knowledge of the world and ascribe the right words to the events experienced inside and outside of the school. The parallelism between the globalisation explained by Decroly and the globalisation explained by the children that attend the Ermitage makes a sizable qualitative jump. The children with whom we spoke were able to tell us what interested them and why what they were studying was important to their lives. They knew how to distinguish learning by discovery from imitative learning; they knew to say that ties exist among the various curricular and extracurricular activities.

The school that follows the method of the Jenaplan of Peter Petersen was opened in 2011 by decision of the Gent community. It gathers in children of 36 different nationalities. Every child enters the classroom knowing how to speak Dutch; for this, the child may spend one year in a nearby school to learn the language prior to entering the Jenaplan school. Teaching is organised in groups of classes by grade: first and second; third and fourth; fifth and sixth.

The Dalton system of Helen Parkhurst is based on four fundamental principles that guide the educational action of the teachers:

1. independence of the children;
2. the way of working together;
3. freedom;
4. critical thinking.

The children learn how to do their own tasks and think about what they are doing. They know how to ask themselves why a task is completed or not. In pre-school, the work is in groups, while in primary school, individual work is encouraged. Teachers are prepared in training courses organised in Amsterdam, in The Netherlands, and everyone must know the Dalton method. They may also teach in Dutch and French and sometimes in other languages. One must not neglect to say that this school originated in Gent in 1990, in a deprived urban area of the city, and slowly became a school preferred by families from the middle and upper-middle classes. Today it accepts many children of Turkish and Moroccan families and is considered an international school because various languages are spoken. Dutch is the teaching language and French is compulsory from the age of 10. During the recreation period, the children can speak their mother tongues, even if different from the official languages.

The invention of the free-format text, the practice of typography, the experience of advising and making decisions, the architecture of the school thought out for play, movement and imagination were all part of Freinet teaching and in schools

that recaptured their features and enriched them with new visions, because following the founders does not mean copying their example, but means, rather, understanding their spirit to recreate it in new forms. The same inside and outside architecture of the Tielt and Meulebeke schools expresses the vision of co-operative learning of Freinet. Contact with nature and care of animals educate to respect and environmental sustainability. The active participation of families, parents and grandparents are the writings of personal and group biographies and educate to values of identity of belonging. Also adults with special needs are visiting the school when pupils organised an exhibition at the end of a project. These adults are living nearby the school. One of the teacher organised every month at least one activity with his children and people from the elderly care house. A very good example of intergenerational learning and citizenship education. The co-ordinator of the Freinet school in Meulebeke described his school as 'an oasis for children living in a desert of alienation. A reaction against the cultural problems of the cities where impersonality, coldness and emptiness are in charge.

We could settle the school in an area with many activities [nearby is an industrial park, and around the school are meadows and farms]. To me, school zoning is a form of purification, of setting up a rigid model which excludes difference, of splitting off the unacceptable other, the dirt.

He made these remarks on the policy of single-use zoning, characteristic of urban planning in the 20th century. This single-use zoning is against the philosophy of co-operation. In another school the head teacher introduced the 'living room project'. This is not childcare: it simply offers children a safe haven where they can relax and be themselves, with cooking and sewing lessons. The layout of an area has a direct link to behaviour. Teachers learn to translate their pedagogic policy plans into the layout of the infant play area or childcare centre. The theory suggests that the creation of play and reading corners would improve co-operation. The experience of teachers and heads has shown that groups are calmer and the corners are good for creativity and co-operative play. The aim to provide a space to co-operate, and an opportunity to be empowered through the management of the space, meets an educational aim.

Openness to aesthetic and poetical experience in creating new school logos - sensing the emotional import of different colours, for instance in some logos (the rainbow, the tree of life, the house of the giants, the garden of turtles, the butterfly) - might be a form of visual interpretation of cooperation. The identity and the pronouncement of their specific school project will be realised in a combination of picture and world. We talk of visual literacy as if it involved someone looking at things. But to one of these head teachers' visual literacy is not just the art of seeing things but also the art of showing, and of knowing how a school might present its values. Most school logos are very child-friendly images. Some are based on a child's creation, while others are made by design studios imitating the child's way of drawing. Teachers find these logos necessary, one said:

If the images could be explained by words, then you wouldn't need the images. Their distinctness, their presence, their quality of appeal could be dispensed with.

Images have long been recognized for their transformative power, but this can be a new concept for teachers and pupils, coming from the literal and rational tradition in which texts and records are not supposed to change. Logos can be very disturbing for the older generation of teachers - and very invigorating for the younger generation. A head master remarked

School logos have a deep faith in the positive, creative powers of all human beings and especially of children.

The schools of the Jenaplan, Freinet and Dalton are community schools subject to national inspections and can use a free curriculum that is faithful to the method that the school establishes; the municipality is responsible for financing and school policy. Waldorf and Montessori schools are not considered community schools; they are method schools that are inspected by commissions outside the national system of instruction.

References

Benjamin, W. (1950). *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Benjamin, W. (1966). *Angelus Novus: Ausgewählte Schriften 2*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Decroly, O. (1925). "La fonction de globalisation et l'enseignement", *Bulletin de la Société française de pédagogie*.

Ferracuti, M. (2008). Una "scintilla divina" dentro la postmodernità. *Il Nodo. Scuole in rete*, 33, April, 5-6.

Freinet, C. (1928). *Plus de manuels scolaires: méthode vivante et rationnelle de travail scolaire par l'imprimerie à l'école*. Saint-Paul: Éditions de l'Imprimerie à l'école.

Hölderlin, F. (1915). *Hymnen an die Ideale der Menschheit*. Leipzig: Insel.

Liotard, J.-F. (1979). *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit.

Morel, N. (2013). A social investment strategy for the knowledge-based economy, *Scuola democratica*, 3: 631-650.

Pace, D. (2017). *The Decoding the Disciplines Paradigm: Seven Steps to Increased Student Learning*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Parkhurst, H. (1922). *Education on the Dalton plan*. New York: E. P. Dutton & company.

Petersen, P. (1927). *Der kleine Jena-plan*. Weinheim: Beltz.

Warren, S. (2016) "Struggling for visibility in higher education: caught between neoliberalism 'out there' and 'in here'-an autoethnographic account", *Journal of Education Policy*, 32(2): 127-140 Online 1 November 2016.