

# The Heart of the Citizenship Education and Revival of New Schools in Europe

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## Abstract

Our present time is characterised by many contradictions and the aspect of uncertainty indicates a sense of our deep loss of values. Education is the traditional space, in which generations create meanings and adults prefigure the future. Despite the idea of liquid modernity, which dominates our existence, we are convinced that we inherit meaningful testimonies of schools born in the spirit of the Reform from the pedagogic culture of the last two centuries. Schools, such as Dalton, Jena Plan, Decroly and Freinet, are still alive and bringing us a new message of citizenship education coherent with the impulse of their founders. Following our field study to investigate the reality of the Schools of Method in the areas of the Flanders and Brussels we were able to draw a solid concept of community. In the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we assume that the modern western culture reaches its task to convert the dispute into tolerance. Citizenship education wishes to overcome any separations and indicates the road to peace and harmony. It is not by chance that Reform Schools are now reaffirming the original impulse. They are transforming the contradictions of our postmodern society into the management of daily education. Headmasters and teachers are seriously opting for movement and variety of the curriculum against school stereotypes of the disciplines. Children become protagonists of the reformation, using the methodology of dialogue, development and discovery. Teachers and parents appear to be fundamental parts of the process, and learning democracy in school begins with the practice of a council of pupils: discussing, deciding, doing. The external world actively enters schools to shape life. History is composed of the biographies of senior citizens, mainly grandfathers, and languages are matter of pride for children from families with migrant backgrounds.

**Keywords:** reform, pedagogy, schools of method, values, education, great educators, memory, citizenship education, community schools

## 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. Grand 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 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 continuity between the environment and the person, which creates feelings of belonging to that environment, starting from one's own story. 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 world 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 Jena plan. During our trip in the month of February 2017<sup>1</sup>, we were able to familiarise

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ourselves with the methods and appreciate the current implementations being adapted to 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:

- random choice of four method schools defined as community schools;
- connection of the schools to well-known models of educational innovation;
- semi-structured interviews with privileged observers represented by school rectors, teachers, parents and children;
- observation of the school and classes during morning teaching activities;
- reading of the scholastic material prepared for the teaching and made up of homework, drawing, physical activities, research and evaluation;
- 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;
- research on the specificity and difference of these schools in the education panorama of the European school;
- connection of these schools to other innovative pedagogical experiences in operation in other countries and, specifically, in Italy;
- persistence of the pedagogical legacy and awareness of the importance of the method;
- interest in the preservation of the original model.

### **Renewal beyond memory**

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 show 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 Jena Plan 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 Jena Plan 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:

- independence of the children;
- the way of working together;
- freedom;
- 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, 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 poor 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 taking 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 pedagogical cooperativism of Freinet. Contact with nature and care of animals educate towards 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.

The schools of the Jena Plan, 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.

### **Conclusion**

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 Jena Plan 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.

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