

## EDITORIAL

This Special Number is devoted to preschool education, or to be more exact, to those preschool establishments which cater for children from the ages of two to six or seven years – nursery schools and kindergartens – and to the associated educational theory and action.

The latter half of the XIXth and the first half of the XXth century were dominated by important personalities who put forward a coherent and total system of preschool education: Fröbel, Montessori, Decroly. These three great educationists made – though this may not have been sufficiently appreciated – a kind of synthesis of what was known at the time and proposed an original, comprehensive solution. Fröbel's thinking represents a privileged point of convergence of the romantic and rationalist educational movements: Comenius, Rousseau, Basedow, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Diesterweg, . . . . Montessori in some ways marks the end of the first period of experimental psychology, the analytical period introduced by Fechner, Weber, and so many others. Finally Decroly established his entire system from the first total, active view of the personality of the child.

Since then we have tried to assimilate the ideas of these great masters, to translate their ideas into educational practice and to explore the personality, intelligence and physical world of the child. The progress made so far is quite considerable; the names Piaget, Erikson, Bowlby, and those of so many other research workers are a striking proof of this. On the educational level in particular, preschool education is beginning to derive great benefit from the unusual expansion of educational research which was at first focused on primary and secondary education.

Nevertheless, we have still failed to find that outstanding person able to make a synthesis of all contemporary findings and to put forward a new general system to replace that of one of the three great predecessors.

We should have liked to have presented a picture of the most important psycho-pedagogical developments in the field of educational psychology of these last ten or twenty years. It will be quickly noted that we have sketched rather than painted and have suggested guiding lines rather than followed through to close and detailed analyses. Why? Because throughout the world so many things happen simultaneously that a number like this cannot deal with what is a moving, let us say a disparate reality.

This disparate nature is at the moment not limited to preschool education but applies to all contemporary education. If it appears that this Special Number is somewhat diverse in nature, it is because we are, or at least we believe we are, in a period of transition and development.

How is this Special Number arranged?

As usual, it is firstly divided into two broad sections, main articles and communications. In the first, two groups of contributions will be found: the general state of the problems and selected research projects. The second begins with an historical survey and a review of cultural observations. We then present specific studies which, backed up by certain book reviews which will be quoted, give an insight into preschool education on the one hand in highly industrialised European countries, and on the other in South and Central America and in Asia. The position in the United States is mentioned in the main article by B. Trouillet. As regards Africa, it will be remembered that the editor published an article in this Review on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of UNESCO.<sup>1)</sup>

The book review section and a selective bibliography conclude the number.

After having dealt with the situation of preschool education in general, Bernard Trouillet, Research Fellow of the *Deutsches Institut für internationale pädagogische Forschung* (German Institute for International Educational Research), Frankfurt, offers a comparative, synthesised study. In this way we are immediately brought to the essence of the matter.

Then, using the reformist tendencies stirring in the *Kindergärten* in the Federal Republic of Germany as a starting point, Walter Schultze, Professor of Education and Director of the same institute, raises a problem which concerns us all. The importance which the discoveries of the modern behavioral sciences make us attach to the systematic education of children below seven years of age, leads us, doesn't it – mainly on the pretext of ensuring maximum cognitive development – to rob the child of the beneficial influences of a more natural, less restrictive world. It would be wrong, the editor feels, to avoid this question. Is robotisation through active conditioning so unimaginable?

Moshe Smilansky, Professor of Sociology of Education, University of Tel Aviv, and his wife Sarah Smilansky, Senior Research Psychologist, Henrietta Szold Institute, Tel Aviv, illustrate one of the main tendencies of contemporary research and action for preventing, diagnosing and compensating socio-cultural handicaps. The same preoccupation figures prominently in the book of C. Bereiter and S. Engelmann<sup>2)</sup> as it does also in the American Head Start programme. All these efforts tend simultaneously to make use of the maximum human potential and to give each person the best possible chances in life, a thoroughly democratic attitude.

Another main tendency is shown in the article by Patricia Olmsted

from the Institute for Development of Human Resources, University of Florida, and her two co-authors, Carolyn Parks and Annette Rickel. Here it is an aspect of cognitive development, the grouping and classification which J. Piaget and B. Inhelder have studied and which the research workers at the Merrill-Palmer Institute take up with an experimental approach. Nickel's book <sup>2)</sup> on visual perception also belongs to the cognitive domain.

We should also have liked to have dealt with research on compensation specifically for verbal handicaps, on the first introduction to mathematics and on the relation between preschool education and education within the family. Unfortunately this has not been possible.

The affective domain continues to attract much attention, as is witnessed by M. G. Janis' competent study.<sup>2)</sup> Finally, in spite of its methodological shortcomings, the research by D. Gardner and J. Cass <sup>2)</sup> represents a promising approach: the objective study of teacher-pupil interaction in preschool institutions. No doubt, we may expect a lot of much needed work in this field in the coming years.

The communications begin with a moving tribute to O. Decroly by Valérie Decordes, Brussels, his main collaborator in the field of preschool education. We have tried to preserve all the life, enthusiasm and true poetry of this record. It is good that in a Review which the desire for scientific preciseness can easily make a little dry, we suddenly feel the beat of a human heart. Was this not the best way to remember that the education of young children is also to a large extent a question of deep affection and spontaneous feelings?

Moreover, the works of S. Herbinière-Lebert and Ch. Charrier <sup>2)</sup> and of L. Pourveur <sup>2)</sup> remain directly in the spirit of the thinking of Decroly, the second being particularly conscious of the question of practical application.

The need for affection we have just mentioned, is also stressed, but in a quite different context, by Germaine Duparc, Director of the *Maison des Petits*, and Professor at the Institute of Education of the University of Geneva, who points out the gulf existing between the natural environment which respects the biological rhythms of which the child has so great a need, and the hurried, artificial type of world ours is constantly becoming.

As we showed at the beginning of the Editorial, the contributions which follow take us, in a way, on a world tour of preschool institutions and their problems. We are unable to go into detail but above all let us remember the universal realisation of the importance of a scientifically devised education during the first years of life.

Last but not least follows the work of Elsa Walter, psychologist and former Director of the Institute of Education of the University of the West Indies, dealing with teacher training in the British West Indies. It is possible to be completely convinced of the crucial importance of pre-school education and yet to be able to do nothing, because of the lack of well-trained teachers. This problem is raised everywhere but is particularly acute in developing countries. This is why E. Walter's work deserves special attention. It shows how intelligence used with energy and human feeling may compensate for a lack of wealth. This example may be a subject for deliberation for all those who claim to be convinced of the vital importance of the first years of life but who excuse their lack of activity as being due to the shortage of human and material resources.

In conclusion, whatever were our limitations, a wide field has been covered in this Special Number. We should have liked it to have been a hundred times fuller. Indeed, no effort must be spared to win, all over the world, what may still be termed the battle for preschool education.

#### REFERENCES

- 1) DE LANDSHEERE, G.: "Unesco-Afrique: deuxième génération - éducation préscolaire," *International Review of Education*, XII, 1966, 3, pp. 288-298.
- 2) The book is reviewed in this issue.

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