

# THE INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION IN GENEVA A CENTRE OF THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION / NEW EDUCATION MOVEMENT

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## FIRST STEPS

The early stages of the progressive education movement can be traced in the USA and many parts of Europe, and the characteristics of the “new education” are fully described in the chapters of the book “The Internationality of Progressive Education”: study of the child, creation of experimental schools, acceptance of the role of education in restructuring society. In all cases, progressive educators were reacting against the traditional intellectualized forms of schooling around them, and they reached out, searched for contacts with like-minded colleagues abroad. Indeed, this effort to make and maintain linkages gave the movement an international quality which was to become more visible in the early years of the 20th century.

Geneva played an important part in many of the steps in this direction. In 1899 the educator Adolphe Ferrière who travelled a great deal around Europe and promoted the idea of educational renewal by what he termed the “active school”, established in Geneva an International Bureau of New Schools. When in 1909 the Belgian Edouard Peeters set up in Ostende the Bureau International de Documentation Educative (BIDE), his monthly journal “Minerva” served also as the organ for Ferrière’s group. Then in 1912 came the creation in Geneva of the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau which crowned the efforts of Claparède to obtain university recognition for child psychology and experimental pedagogy. The Institut was designed to prepare teachers, carry out research and provide information not only to serving teachers but also to the general public – a typical example of progressive education. It soon became clear that the number of students and visitors and correspondence from abroad required some special treatment, and to provide such a service Ferrière’s Bureau became a section of the Institut.

While these efforts were due to private individuals or an academic institution, the exceptional work of Fanny Fern Andrews should also be mentioned: an American educator and firm advocate of the ideal of peace education she promoted action at an official level in order to obtain curricular change. From 1908 onwards steps were taken to convene in Holland an international conference on education in 1913, with a wide agenda of topics to discuss and a draft for creating an international bureau of education. The war in 1914 put an end to this initiative, but after 1918 the progressive educators returned with greater vigour to form the links which their ideas pre-supposed. In 1921, Ferrière with Elizabeth Rotten and Beatrice Ensor formed the body that became the New Education Fellowship. When the League of Nations was set up, many efforts were made to promote some sort of international organization for education, on the analogy of the ILO – but the official reaction was always that education was too much a matter of national sovereignty to permit of international regulation.

It was usually on the occasion of conferences, such as the Congress on Moral Education and the periodical meetings of the NEF, that proposals were put forward. The presence of the League in Geneva did, however, make one need evident, since a private International School was started in 1924 to cater for children of the League families. It was soon after this that a distinguished committee of patrons met in Geneva, and encouraged by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, they persuaded the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau to

establish a new body on 18 December 1925: the International Bureau of Education. This was essentially an association in Swiss law, open to any person or group interested in education; the members elected a council, of whom at least half lived in Geneva. The Bureau was to hold a centre of documentation and information, to foster research on educational problems, and to serve as a bridge between institutions and organizations working in the same fields. The director was Pierre Bovet, assisted by Ferrière and Elizabeth Rotten.

There had always been some hostility in the relationship between progressive educators and the public education authorities, especially from the latter. Although this was covered over in the creation of the IBE, it remained true that the Bureau was a private institution even while it maintained contacts with the League of Nations and Ministries of Education. In the first years, from 1926 to 1929, the Bureau showed remarkable vitality in the range of its activities. A variety of small exhibits were arranged, starting with one on progressive education in the USA; lectures were given in Geneva and other cities; along with analysing journals of education, the Bureau staff gathered descriptions of some European school systems in a publication intended to help visiting teachers, and this later developed into a plan for the publication of the "International Yearbook of Education"; in 1927 a major conference was organized in Prague on the theme of "Peace through the school".

While energy and ideas were not lacking, resources remained scant. In 1928, with Elizabeth Rotten's departure, Pedro Rosselló was appointed assistant director and he became both the motor force of the IBE and its main chronicler. He remarked in his study "Les précurseurs du Bureau International d'Education" how those who had prepared the ground for this new institution failed to take account of juridical and material questions – they were driven by ideals of pacifism and universal fraternity while searching for the development of schools. The lack of financial support became dramatic in 1928 when a project to organize a large conference in Geneva for a world federation of educational associations led the IBE to commitments which could not be honoured because very few of the expected participants arrived. As a result the third assembly of the IBE in July 1929 dissolved the original IBE and adopted statutes for a new body.

#### **CREATION OF THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL IBE**

The founding signatories of the new IBE were the Canton of Geneva, the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and representatives of the governments of Ecuador and Poland – a strangely mixed membership but sufficient to confer intergovernmental status on the Bureau. With the new organization came several changes. Bovet resigned his IBE post, to devote himself to the Institut, and Piaget was appointed director of the IBE. He and Rosselló continued to direct the Bureau for the next forty years. The legal basis was now set out more clearly, with the purpose and structure modified in several respects: the IBE was defined as an information centre, not a coordinating body nor directly concerned with research; membership included governments as well as public institutions (which covered ministries of education at national level), international unions, but not private individuals. The Council or governing body comprised members' representatives, and it appointed an executive committee. The first Council meeting was held in July 1930.

After this rather summary statement, it should be emphasized that the creation of the inter-governmental IBE in 1929 was a remarkable innovation. While the tie to the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau was weakened, some of the original IBE activities continued for a few years: thus, the summer course for teachers lasting one week in Geneva, on "how to make the League of Nations better known and to develop the spirit of international cooperation", took place annually. In 1931 the fourth course attracted 83 students from 17 countries.

But such direct contact with teachers was by degrees overtaken by official communication. With no precedents or models to work on, it seems as though the new IBE shaped its programme empirically, as a response to the demands it met. The membership of the organization grew steadily, and at the second meeting

of the Council, reports on educational progress were tabled by six Ministries of Public Education who were members of the Bureau. Encouraged by this experience, the Executive Committee asked the Director to "invite all Ministries of Public Education to communicate to the third meeting of the Council a report on the educational progress made in their countries during the school year 1931/32, and to send representatives to the Council meeting at which those reports will be presented". Replies were received from 24 States, which included several Canadian provinces but only one Swiss Canton, Geneva. A good part of the Council meeting was devoted to a reading of these reports, followed at times by comments from Professor Piaget on significant aspects of what had been done. The reports were printed in extenso as an annex to the much shorter annual report of the Council. It was reasonable, therefore, to treat the country reports as a separate reference book, and so the "Annuaire international de l'éducation et de l'enseignement" appeared for the first time in 1933, an experiment which was to become standard work for many years to come.

The extension of the IBE membership and representation at the Council meetings was felt to amount to an international conference, and so in 1933 a further innovatory step was taken: the Director was asked to invite Ministries of Education to send representatives in 1934 to the Third International Conference on Education which would take place at the same time as the Council meeting. There were all manner of subtle manoeuvres here: for one thing, governments were given to believe that the idea of an international conference was not particularly new, since this was to be the third such event; and the diplomatic hurdle of convening such a conference in Switzerland (not yet a member of the IBE) had to be cleared. This problem was solved when the Swiss Confederation joined the IBE, so the International Conference was convened by IBE through the intermediary of the Swiss Federal Council, a formula that was followed until 1946.

The pattern of work adopted for the 1934 International Conference has remained in force ever since. In preparation, the IBE staff asked for national reports to be sent in, and undertook comparative studies of two or three educational topics of moment at that time. During the Conference delegates present and comment on their national reports, and in separate sessions discuss the findings of the topical surveys, leading up to the adoption of a recommendation on each theme. When Rosselló examined retrospectively the experience of the Conferences, he stressed the importance of the direct contacts between delegates – information and ideas shared in informal conversation were one of the main benefits of the meeting. The adoption of a recommendation on educational matters, even when cautiously expressed, was a novelty in 1934; whereas the ILO and other international bodies did much of their work by instruments of a mandatory character – conventions – the IBE was obliged to limit itself to suggestions. Nevertheless, Rosselló felt that the adoption of these texts provided education officials with useful guidelines to action, so that the collective recommendations over a period constituted a real code which influenced the development of education systems.

It is interesting to examine the subjects of the earliest recommendations, from 1934 to 1939, in the light of conditions at the time and the direction taken then by the progressive education movement. In 1934 we find: compulsory education and raising the school leaving age (No. 1); admission to secondary schools (No. 2); economies in the field of education (No. 3). In 1935: professional training of elementary school teachers (No. 4); and of secondary school teachers (No. 5); Councils of Public Instruction (No. 6). In 1936: special schools (No. 7), rural education (No. 8), and legislation on school buildings (No. 9). In 1937: school inspection (No. 10), the teaching of modern languages (No. 11), teaching of psychology in training of teachers (No. 12). In 1938: salaries of elementary school teachers (No. 13), the teaching of classical languages (No. 14), the drafting choice and use of textbooks (No. 15). And in 1939: salaries of secondary school teachers (No. 16), organization of pre-school education (No. 17), teaching geography in secondary schools (No. 18).

In reviewing this record, Rosselló made a rough classification of the recommendations into those of "administrative character" (the 13 items underlined above) and those of "an essentially educational nature" (the remaining 5). This dichotomy may appear strange today, since it confounds administration and policy, and

reserves the classification education or pedagogy for curriculum matters. The point of Rosselló's analysis was to show how far the IBE in its earliest days tried to interest and attract those in Ministries of Education who might hesitate to become involved in international activities. Presumably the Executive Committee of the IBE as well as Piaget and Rosselló thought on these lines, and chose topics with the "administrators" in mind. However, scrutiny of contemporary meetings of progressive educators, such as the 1937 NEF Conference in South Africa on "Educational adaptations in a changing society" shows how similar were the agendas of educators, "new" and "official".

There was, indeed, a great debate in the 20s and 30s between progressives who advocated activity schools and the conservatives who upheld the traditional public school. In the United States, the Eight-Year Study of the late 1930s seemed to favour the new schools – but in fact many of their ideas and practices had already slowly entered the main stream of education.

Probably the IBE was an important factor in this process of the spread of educational ideas. It had been created through the sense of international solidarity among a small number of progressives; then by its work in documentation and information, and by successfully showing that an International Conference on Education was both possible and useful, it led public education systems to adopt many of the progressives' ideas.

In any case, such was the situation when the outbreak of hostilities in 1939 put a temporary end to the regular activities of the IBE. Despite the break in communications, the IBE continued to fulfil its mission in other ways. A service of intellectual assistance to prisoners of war was started: funds and books were collected from various parts of the world and parcels of books were sent to prisoners of war camps, with efforts to stimulate study activities among the inmates.

#### **THE FOUNDATION OF UNESCO AND CHANGED POSITION OF THE IBE**

At the end of the 1939-45 war, the United Nations structure of international organizations was put into place. Among the specialized fields of collective action, education had an important place: the contrast with the situation in 1919-31 is striking. A conference of Ministers of Education was held in London in 1945, when the constitution of UNESCO was adopted and the agency set up in 1946. At the time the feeling was widespread that education should in some way help to forge enduring peace, a concept expressed by Archibald MacLeish in words which open the UNESCO charter: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". Again, one is struck by the similarity with ideas expressed by new educators a full generation earlier.

The setting up of UNESCO was viewed from Geneva with mixed feelings. Clearly, the new organization owed much to the IBE, but in scope and size it completely overwhelmed the Geneva institution. However, good relations were soon established, and from 1946 onwards the different possible forms of co-operation were explored, which led in 1952 to an agreement which lasted until 1969. A joint commission was established to ensure "unity of action".

The main activities of the IBE were resumed, with appropriate support from UNESCO. Thus, the International Conference was convened jointly by the two Organizations, beginning in 1946 – the special topics that year being equality of opportunity for secondary education and health education in primary and secondary schools. The IBE continued to issue its "International Yearbook of Education" and bulletin, now in parallel English and French editions, expanded its library collections, and UNESCO was associated with the Permanent Exhibition on Public Education in the Palais Wilson. This meant that UNESCO was involved in all aspects of the IBE programme. On the other hand, it also meant that every Member State of UNESCO could

take part in, or profit from, IBE activities. While the number of countries joining UNESCO grew steadily – and their contributions also – the IBE was deprived of this opportunity of growth. In the long run, a financial crisis was inevitable for the Geneva institution.

A less obvious but more important element in the UNESCO-IBE agreement was the provision that the Assistant Director of IBE, Pedro Rosselló, would serve as a part-time staff member of the Paris Organization. This collaboration continued for many years with the present writer who handled the UNESCO programme for information and research in education. It proved a fruitful association, during which we explored the theoretical basis of international co-operation in education – the several aspects of comparative education. Among his other activities, Rosselló was also lecturer and then professor of comparative education at the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which after 1950 became a branch of the University of Geneva as a faculty of psychology and educational sciences. In his IBE role, Rosselló's regular production of the "International Yearbook of Education" required the study of reports coming in from a large number of countries and the preparation each time of an introductory survey. This led him to reflect on the trends or currents that swayed the movement of educational development – the international generalization of ideas and practices. He expressed this view of comparative education in a series of lectures given at the universities of Sao Paulo and Santiago de Chile in 1960, in the framework of UNESCO's Major Project for education in Latin America. The published work, "La teoría de las corrientes educativas", dwells on the possibility of analysing educational developments with a view to predicting, thus preparing for and planning suitable action. As examples of important trends around the 1960 period, Rosselló gives educational reforms, growing State influence, the mass school, crisis in secondary school growth, the triumph of the activity school, the art of teaching transformed into a science...

Along with such enquiries, UNESCO's gathering of educational statistics and a systematic approach to documentation made for closer collaboration with academic centres for comparative education. It was no accident that in the creation of regional societies and an international council of comparative educationists both the IBE and UNESCO played a catalytic role. The practical importance of this branch of study for policy-making and administration is, I believe, now firmly established, and should be seen as one of the IBE's contributions in the 1946-68 period. On the occasion of Rosselló's reaching 65 years of age, the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg devoted an issue of its journal to a Festschrift for him, a collection of essays to mark the importance of his work and of the IBE.

After the steady progress of UNESCO-IBE collaboration for over twenty years, a period of crisis arose around 1968. This was certainly the case in the university world, and it occurred also in the IBE.

#### **INTEGRATION WITH UNESCO**

The resources of the Bureau, drawn mainly from a fixed level annual contribution by countries whose number was unlikely to expand, proved inadequate to finance the programme – and certainly not on a basis of equality with UNESCO. The IBE Council chairman, Eugene Egger, pointed also to other contemporary crises: in the political field, the problems of accommodating new States in the international organizations and meeting their aspirations; and in education, the wave of protest by students against the establishment. After a study by the IBE Council and negotiations with the UNESCO authorities, it was finally decided to accept the integration of the IBE in UNESCO. By the agreement, UNESCO undertook "to continue the work carried out by the IBE since 1929". The new IBE, with a large measure of intellectual and functional autonomy, would be an international centre of comparative education, with the task of pedagogical research work on comparative education and documentation and information.

From 1969 onwards, the IBE has been staffed with UNESCO officials, with a governing Council composed of representatives of 24 Member States who make proposals for the future programme and supervise the carrying out of current activities. In a way, the IBE is one of a constellation of centres and institutes set up by UNESCO as a means of discharging its responsibilities of promoting education, science and culture around the world. But because of its history and traditions, the Bureau can claim a certain precedence.

In these past 24 years the IBE continued its work with a certain number of changes to meet changing conditions. The International Conference on Education is held every two years rather than annually because of the size of the event; contacts are fostered with academic centres of comparative education around the world, leading to the publication of studies on current or emerging problems; and in relations with Ministries of Education emphasis is placed on the need for information which will permit educators to learn from each other. Documentation activities and techniques have kept pace with the computer age, as the Bureau makes extensive use of networking and databases and provides a service of giving training in these fields to staff of Ministries of Education and research centres.

#### CONCLUDING NOTE

The recent life of the IBE, now an integral part of UNESCO, has been traced in rather staccato fashion. This is not to overlook or deny the real progress that has been made in adapting to changing conditions. For the fact is that the Bureau, originally the creation of a small number of dynamic people forming the progressive movement, has survived the vast social, political and technological changes that have overtaken the world since 1925. It forms a not insignificant part of the history of education and still serves to foster international fellowship between those who are engaged in enquiry into improved teaching and learning. The founders would, I believe, be content with the results.

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