

THE WORD

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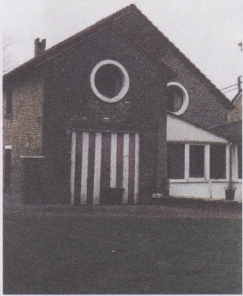
MECHELEN's all-inclusive mayor Bart Somers
ANTWERP's reissue record label Walhalla Records
BRUSSELS' disruptive publishing imprint Medor
GHENT's resurgent alternative education drive
A 32-PAGE COMMISSIONED ART SPECIAL



Outcasts

We don't need no (regular) education

The growth of the Freinet movement and other alternative education models in Belgium



The debate surrounding traditional education's ability to tool our children with the skills needed to exist and prosper in modern society has been gaining traction of late, a fact made no less pressing due to the very real, and visible, failings of traditional education methods.

One needs to look no further than Belgium's dismal international standing in education ratings as proof that something is very, very skewed in the way we teach tomorrow's generation. And, in a bid to shine a light on learning systems that, only a few decades ago, were sidelined as mere fads, we've crisscrossed the country in search of methodologies – from Freinet and Montessori to homeschooling and, even, a Latin-only institute – that work.

Writer MARINA KAZAKOVA
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Pedagogical approaches should be developed from the bottom up, not the other way around. Where there is obligation, there is a resistance.

Opposite page:
Schola Nova

This page:
Armand De Meyer

FREINET – BELGIUM'S LARGEST ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION MOVEMENT

"Célestin Freinet died over 50 years ago, but paradoxically he's becoming more and more popular. The question is why," proclaims Armand De Meyer, a former advisor in the Pedagogical Monitoring Service of the city of Ghent who pretty much single-handedly spearheaded the Freinet movement's uptake in the city. "It is not just his charisma that counts, but the movement he founded that continuously brings to life and develops the philosophy of the author," continues Mr. De Meyer. Indeed, out of approximately 35 primary schools in Ghent, 12 are Freinet schools, a direct result of the relentless work carried out by the city's Pedagogical Centre over the last four decades. "The Pedagogical Centre's purpose was, first and foremost, to improve levels of education. At the time, in the early 70s, Ghent's system of education faced big challenges, most notably a decrease in the number of public schools and the pupils attending them. There was also a massive

migration from Turkey, the system having to take in a growing number of non-Dutch-speakers with a working class background. The main problem was integrating these kids into our educational system. My colleague Luc Heyerick and I were, at that time, busy with research work at the department of Psychology at the University of Ghent and we tried to develop a template on how to give working-class children a better start in primary school. It is within this context that we came up with the compensation program: university teachers were assigned to come to kindergarten twice a week to teach small groups of five-year-olds. The first year of the experiment showed amazing results, but the next years demonstrated no progress. We therefore concluded that the program's content should be integrated into the classroom with regular teachers involved in the process," explains De Meyer. On a whole, the Pedagogical Centre has successfully initiated numerous projects at primary level: a reading-oriented program, a math-oriented program and second language programs. "Our alternative methods were a success and the education inspection decided to implement them on a larger scale. Of course, it didn't work out. Pedagogical approaches should be developed from the bottom up, not the other way around. Where there is obligation, there is a resistance. That's what Freinet says: if a child is obliged to do something, do not expect fruitful results. Therefore, the successful experiments we conducted in a few schools in Ghent didn't translate all that well with the rest of the city," confesses De Meyer. Consequently, the Pedagogical Centre decided to take a different path. "We decided to create our dream school, a school with its own methodology which is not imposed on teachers and students, but one that comes from the bottom up," he continues. "And so, in 1985, our Boomgaard school was born. It was an experience-based school inviting children's input into programming. Teachers were part of a 'construction group' that met every week to discuss the project's evolution. Also, we were in close contact with the French Freinet movement as, at the time, there wasn't a well-developed Freinet movement in Flanders and teachers could only really learn about the Freinet pedagogy mostly through contacts with their French counterparts. We worked together, they visited our classes and worked with the children but it is their sensitivity to children that made it possible for them to work with our children, who didn't speak French. The paradox was that they spoke French but taught Dutch-speaking children. And this is precisely what the Freinet method is all about: he asked kids to teach him how to read and write using their own language. They were a perfect example of the Freinet approach – "do not talk too much and let children express themselves."



FREINETATHENEUM DE WINGERD,
WHERE EDUCATORS, STUDENTS AND
PARENTS BECOME TRUE PARTNERS

In a profession that rewards age and experience, Anne Van Zwijnsvoorde devoted 15 years of her life to teaching in several schools and became De Wingerd's current director in 2013. "I'm often asked what are the differences between Freinet and traditional education systems. One of the examples is building a fruitful and close parent-teacher relationship. Our school is a story about how educators, students and parents become true partners to improve the educational experience for everyone," says Van Zwijnsvoorde. "In terms of decision making, everything I do at school I discuss and decide together with teachers. On Thursdays, children stay an hour longer to talk about their progress, their news, their problems and everything they might want. Afterwards, we have a staff meeting where every teacher serves as an expert and adds something to the final outcome," she continues, by way of explanation. Proof of its winning formula, each spring, a growing number of parents across Ghent attempt to get their children in De Wingerd. According to Freinet's philosophy, a child is characterised by vitality and intrinsic motivation. It is the task of the educational system to coordinate that and provide maximum opportunities. A curious example can be found in the notion of educational sanctions. "We do not use traditional punishments such as staying on at school on Wednesday afternoon, for instance.



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If a student breaks the rules, we talk. We want them to understand to the fullest what they've done wrong. For example, we just had a painting done by students who walked on the roof of the school several days ago. We discussed the situation and, afterwards, asked them to make the sign, so that everyone knows and sees that it is obviously not allowed to go on the roof of the school building," concludes Anne.

ÉCOLE NANIOT, TEACHING CHARACTER
THROUGH SOLIDARITY

For some parents, mainstream education simply cannot meet the educational needs of their little ones, leading parents Sara Boxus and Pierre Smeets to opt for the alternative path for their two toddlers, Basile (almost six years old) and Félicie (almost two years old). "Traditional education doesn't make kids responsible, autonomous and curious enough," says Sara. "That's why we chose a Freinet school. Our eldest son Basile has been attending École Naniot for



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Opposite page, left:
Anne Van
Zwijnsvoorde

Opposite page, right:
Sara Boxus, Pierre
Smeets and their
children Félicie (2)
& Basile (6)

This page, centered:
Caroline Thuysbaert

nearly three years now and Félicie is going to join him next November. The small and cozy school is a primary public school open to everyone. It's non-selective and its pupils come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds," she continues. And, with Freinet schools functioning as cooperative communities, with children, teachers and parents sharing responsibilities, Sara is quick to point out the solidarity prevalent throughout the school. "Everyone knows each other on a first-name basis. Classes work together: 12-year-olds collaborate with the 3-year-olds whilst, evidently, aiming at different objectives according to their age, but still it is all about unity. Children have a class council, which then goes to the school council to defend its decisions. And we as parents also participate in school life. For instance, if you are a web designer, you come in every now and then to share and discuss your skills," she finishes.

SCHOLA NOVA, WHERE CHILDREN LEARN SPOKEN LATIN

In the middle of the fertile lands and broad plains that bear the nickname of 'the wheat loft of Belgium' stands an 18th century former convent, Schola Nova, a private, non-subsidised school for

children aged 6 to 18. "The school was founded in 1995, 22 years ago, by Stéphane Feye. We are the only school in the world that teaches spoken Latin so many hours a week. The primary aim was to conserve the cultural heritage of Europe – Latin and Greek languages," says Caroline Thuysbaert, the school principal for the past 21 years and part of a new generation of up-and-coming masters of alternative education. "We started with only one pupil and now count 65 students and 15 teachers. Latin is our common language, and I find it a shame that it's dying out. I see Europe abandoning its roots but, to me, if a person doesn't know his or her past, then he or she won't be able to understand the present." Caroline is a traditionalist to say the least. She religiously observes the education process and closely follows the classical humanistic curriculum which goes beyond mere writing and reading, to also teach boys and girls wisdom as well as eloquence. That being said, it is the combination of tradition and experiment that attracts parents, warrants respect and brings out the best in pupils. "We do not have one particular pedagogical view as, for instance, Steiner, Freinet or Montessori. I have an opinion that there is a disease called 'pedagogism', which I definitely do not support. I think any good method or

philosophy executed by a bad teacher is not worth using and, vice versa, a bad method executed by a talented teacher can be a fruitful one. The essential quality of a teacher is to be passionate about what he or she teaches. For students, it is important to have someone who gives them a desire to learn. It's also crucial, from the director's perspective, to give teachers the freedom to teach as they want, to let them be themselves. Nobody should cut the wings of a teacher. What's important for the teacher is to have the feeling of teaching," she goes on. "Some of our teachers, including myself, do not have formal teaching education, but when we hire teachers, we give them a test period of one month. In my view, a teacher should be able to teach two to three subjects, which means he or she is open-minded and not bound to one book of mathematics they stick to all their lives," she says by way of explanation. "We evolved from just a morning course to a full school. The first ten years were really hard, people didn't understand what we did and why. And we didn't have time to prove it. Now we have tangible outcomes – graduates in universities – and you could say we've gained a reputation. Also, we're a completely independent and private entity which, of course, is not always easy. A few families do support us though and there's also a foundation that supports the school. We've never refused pupils whose parents cannot afford our fees and we have a system of private foundations that help financially precarious families to pay for their kids to study at our school," concludes Caroline, assuaging any fears of her institution being attainable for wealthy families only.

DE ZONNEWIJZER STEINER SCHOOL, WHERE CHANGE IS TAUGHT

De Zonnewijzer is a spacious modern building in a serene tree-lined street in Wijgmaal, in the suburbs of Leuven. While the school's outside view is already in itself a sight to be seen, the indoor atmosphere is unique too. Walls feature oil paintings created by pupils: surrealistic Magritte-style pieces, impressionist landscapes, colourful expressionism on canvas, poems written all over the windows and glass doors. To any observer, the message couldn't be any clearer: this is a school where an appreciation of nature and the arts is deeply embedded in children and teacher's lives. As of 2017, there were nine secondary Steiner schools in Flanders where teachers strive to incorporate Waldorf pedagogy into their practice. The aim of Waldorf schooling is to educate the 'whole child' – head, heart and hands. The curriculum is as broad as time allows, and balances academic subjects with artistic and practical skills. "Consistent with his philosophy called anthroposophy, Steiner designed a



curriculum responsive to the developmental phases in childhood. He thought that schools should cater to the needs of children rather than the demands of the economic society, so he developed schools that encourage creativity and free-thinking," says An, who's been working at De Zonnewijzer since 1995. "Our primary aim is to coach young people and support them in the development of their potential. For us, it's really important to make sure that they are able not just to function in society or to adapt, but to make a change," she says. Steiner Schools in Belgium have been receiving state subsidies since the beginning of the 1980s, with teachers' salaries paid directly by the state. A condition, however, is that teachers must have the state diploma, which means that the school's choice of teachers is somewhat restricted. "Most of our teachers come from traditional schools or directly from university. Afterwards, they all are invited to participate in Steiner courses in Belgium or abroad as, in the end, they should all be open to new things and everyday learning since they have to create a set of their own tools to effectively teach the subjects," she concludes, reinforcing the importance of teachers' ability to develop their own methods as central to the success of such alternative education systems.

MONTESSORI KIDS, WHERE CHILDREN LEARN AT THEIR OWN PACE

"The problem of today's traditional education system is that it focuses on teaching, not learning, it focuses on the adult, not on the child. This goes



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Opposite page:
An De Vogelaere

This page:
Marc Ciepers

a long way in explaining why unconventional schooling, which emphasises a child's development, has gradually been gaining more respect from the new generation of parents," states Marc Ciepers, headmaster of the Montessori Kids school and director of Montessori Training Centre of Belgium. "Montessori classrooms are constructed specifically to meet the child's needs at different stages of his or her development. The child's natural love of learning is respected and emphasis is placed on the importance of learning at one's own pace. If a child continuously wants to return to the library corner, it is because he or she is in a period sensitive to reading. Therefore it is essential that teachers carefully monitor each child's progress and that he or she also directs each child into areas of their natural interest," he concludes.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF HOMESCHOOLING IS KNOWLEDGE, NOT FREEDOM

When four years ago Kathleen Nies and her family moved from the US to Belgium, she and her husband decided that they would manage the education of their eight children themselves. "We tried a bunch of different variations, who was

at school and who was not, and eventually ended up with four kids homeschooled – Veronica (14), Elizabeta (13), Sebastian and Michael (both 10) – and four going to a traditional public school," says Kathleen. In Belgium, education is compulsory, but school attendance is not. Article 24 of the Belgian Constitution offers parents "free choice" with regard to the education of their children. Parents who turn to homeschooling often feel they are able to offer a richer and more inspiring experience than a traditional school. In this respect, Kathleen uses a rigorous curriculum. She feels drawn toward classical education and created the curriculum with the focus on "language, literature and grammar. All of them have schedules for every day. They start at 8am and finish late in the evening. You have a recess, a lunch break, classes – it's very serious," admits Kathleen. "We use video courses, online courses, books – all types of different tools. And yes, that gives you a certain freedom, but they have to take tests of course. In Belgium, for instance, they do assessments every two years whilst in America, it's once a year," she goes on. "Girls want to go to a really good university," says Kathleen, "and what really speaks to universities is homeschooling. In America, we have to take SAT tests – an entrance level test to the kind of university you are able to get into. Veronica took it last year, four years earlier, and did better than most students who were about to go to university. I think when she takes it officially in three years, she'll be fine. That's the number one thing – universities consider grades, but they also want to know who you are. If there is a lot of music, travelling and languages, you shouldn't be worried at all," she concludes, as way of reassurance.

A WAY FORWARD

All in all, the growth in alternative education, not only in Belgium but throughout the world, can be explained both by the failings of traditional education – a one-size-fits-all, bottoms down approach over reliant on tests and statistics – and parents' intention to find methods that are better suited to the increasingly strenuous society their children's will come of age in. If anything, alternative education points to a pressing need to rethink age-old educational wisdom, one which puts both the pupil and the teacher at the heart of the process. Indeed, just as the consumer society is best served by catering to the needs of the end consumer, education will best be served by answering a simple question: what do children need to further themselves in and adapt themselves to an ever-shifting paradigm in modern society? The answer, we suggest, doesn't reside in an imposed curriculum but, rather, in one that is built together with those that'll need and use it the most.