

Abstract

Because Paul Geheeb was not a self-publicist but a gifted theoretician and teacher, he has been overlooked to some degree while the schools he created and directed continued to thrive, influence others and draw world acclaim. They represent the best in the evolution of liberal, humanizing education. It is the intent and purpose of this article to examine the central focus of Geheeb's philosophy of education in the context of the *Ecole d'Humanité*, the school which he founded last and directed longest.

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With Paul Geheeb from the "Odenwaldschule" to the "Ecole d'Humanité"

The *Ecole d'Humanité*, ostensibly lost somewhere in the high alpine landscape of central Switzerland, is nevertheless as international as it is isolated. The school is as idealistic and pragmatic in its approach to education today as it was a half century ago under the direction of its founder, Paul Geheeb. But Geheeb's conception of education was not destined to be restricted to one particular time or place. The man and his work have become a part of our heritage of humanistic education and should therefore continue to be examined by teachers and scholars everywhere for purposes of comparison to our own current practices. By emphasizing practice instead of systematic theory, by regarding each child as a yet unexplored and developing world in progress, and by encouraging that world to grow optimally and find its proper place and purpose among others, Geheeb has left behind not only the immediate value of his schools but also an extensive model of what, in his estimation, the best of teachers and school systems might be.¹

Unlike other educators of the late nineteenth century, Paul Geheeb sensed from the start that even the best of theories degenerate rapidly into simplistic slogans and mindless clichés. That alone may have been sufficient reason for him to create new schools rather than merely theories of education. His practical application of learning in an academic community (developed first in his *Odenwaldschule* and then again after his departure from Germany in 1934 in the *Ecole d'Humanité*) has continued by virtue of its humaneness and success to influence countless other schools and educational theories throughout the twentieth century. But the results of Geheeb's efforts and ideas are still acknowledged less in scholarly publications than in the enduring ability of the schools he founded to remain vital and resist the easy temptation to harden themselves in a doctrinaire manner. Great educators have always been able to translate their fascination for people and ideas into the subtle art of teaching, but few indeed have successfully endowed their institutions with the lasting essence of their special insights and understanding.

Subject matter and intelligent analysis have continued through history to be the fundamental concerns of school systems, but also the ultimate questions of how students learn to assimilate the material and how they are to find the appropriate humane use for it has always been a major problem for great educators. Since the days of Socrates, the idea of *e-ducare*, deriving wisdom out of oneself rather than the act of merely acquiring the external facts of knowledge, has been considered the

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greater goal of education. According to Socrates, the unexamined life was not worth living, but that life which first had to be examined was one's own. How and where it was examined was also important: At the crossroads, in the marketplace, on the roads leading into and away from Athens. Socrates preferred to examine man's values and assumptions in public, openly in the community, for it was there and with discussion available to everyone who happened by that the full measure of thought and its social applicability could be best discussed and evaluated.

For Geheeb, however, the crossroads of learning in the twentieth century had to be constructed in the form of special schools where knowledge and self could interact at leisure, where values could be examined in depth, and dialogue could be cultivated at length. In a certain sense Geheeb transformed the Socratic dialogue into a school-community where the meeting of people and ideas could evolve and unite in a creative process of its own. In the last analysis, however, as Geheeb perceived at the turn of the century in his address at the opening of the *Odenwaldschule*, there were no easy approaches or fixed answers to education or to life. The best that one could learn was how to wrestle courageously with the world and to pursue one's truth with all one's energy, intelligence, and the fullness of one's being.

Whoever has come here with the expectation that the work of learning is going to be made more comfortable will certainly be disappointed. No, we don't want to make it more comfortable, — we want to make it more difficult by setting higher goals and greater demands for your insight, for your initiative, for your energy, for your intellectual desires. Of course, we will make things somewhat easier by not narrowing down or suppressing the creative power residing in you. Rather, we shall try to bring about the freer development and a more powerful sense of strength with the hope of making you independent and making us [your teachers] eventually unnecessary.²

I

Paul Geheeb was born in 1870 in a small town in Turingia, the son of a pharmacist. In time he studied philology, theology, medicine, philosophy, psychology, and botany at the University of Jena, but even as a young man and during his ambitious career as a student, he found ample time to work for such liberal causes as the emancipation of women, the improved living conditions for the poor, education for slum children, anti-alcoholism, and an end to practices of anti-semitism.

Along with the countless other social reformers and writers at the turn of the century,³ Geheeb was deeply disturbed by the callous and often destructive education of children, but contrary to many others Geheeb was actively motivated by the hope that better schools would lead to a greater humanization of society in the future. In the opening speech of the *Odenwaldschule* in 1910 he spoke about the potential for children to unfold and strengthen their ability to work and to help others, but first he spoke about the deplorable conditions of the traditional German schools of the times:

Our public schools with their overfilled classes are instructional institutions in which there is only fleeting contact between the older and the younger generations. Human beings, however, can only develop fully by learning cooperatively and working in communities.

The dissatisfaction with public schools is widely felt, and the countless attempts to reform them have failed. People complain about the overburdening of schools and our educators argue about which parts of the curriculum should be cut and where. But the school cannot be reformed with a pair of scissors. The solution is not to be found in the educational institutions in which passively attentive students sit across from lecturing teachers, and then have to spend the other half of the day torturing themselves at home trying to learn what had been instructed.

The solution is to transform these educational institutions into learning communities in which the students work together with their teachers much in the same way that the workers do with their supervisors in a construction crew.⁴

After concluding his studies and working in experimental schools for almost a decade, Geheeb had a clear sense of what he wanted to achieve when founding the now well-known *Odenwaldschule* near Heppenheim in Hessen. The school, conceived in spirit and practice as "a pedagogical

laboratory,"⁵ soon won the interest and attention of educators everywhere for the animation of its learning community and for the concerted efforts of Geheeb to involve students in a process of motivating themselves to learn. In a very short time the *Odenwaldschule* became a major influence in the international movement for educational reform which was awakening in the Western World after the turn of the century. But insofar as Geheeb emphasized an *attitude* rather than an ideology, his approach to education remained direct, individual, and humane rather than prescriptive, abstract, and impersonal. What preoccupied him most was the day to day involvement with his young people in the process of merging life and learning in a way that would nurture growth, self-confidence, optimal knowledge, and a sense of critical responsibility for one's self and one's world.

But before the influence of Geheeb and his associates could root itself firmly in the soil of Germany and Western Europe, the new wave of nationalistic and militant education of the Third Reich made it obvious to Geheeb that his out-spoken and responsible form of education would no longer be tolerated in its own land. Therefore, in 1934, Paul Geheeb, his wife and co-founder of the *Odenwaldschule*, Edith Geheeb-Cassirer, and a few dedicated faculty, emigrated to Switzerland and founded the *Ecole d'Humanité*. The transplanting of the school to Versoix, near Geneva, was not easy, but it survived for the next twelve years under the most primitive of conditions until the Geheebes discovered an ideal permanent site for their school in Goldern, in the Bernese Oberland, a place surrounded by fields, farms, forests, and the majestic glacial peaks of central Switzerland. Once again the Geheebes and a few loyal friends began their work, and once again the school began to grow.

Although the new site was located in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, the French name given it earlier at Versoix, the *Ecole d'Humanité*, was retained. There were of course difficulties and setbacks over the years, but the *Ecole* grew steadily. By the time Paul Geheeb died in 1961 at the age of 90, he and his schools had acquired wide recognition and tributes had arrived from countries and institutions the world over. He had received the Goethe Medal from the Hessian Ministry of Education, honorary doctor degrees from such diverse institutions as the University of Tuebingen and the Visva Bharati University in India, and he could in retrospect count such significant figures among his personal friends and admirers as Romain Rolland, Albert Einstein, Hermann Lietz, Rosa Luxemburg, Albert Schweizer, Hermann Hesse, Frank Wedekind, and many others. Of his many tributes however, the *Laudation* from the Ministry of Education of Germany best conveys the essential influence of Paul Geheeb and the schools he established.

You have given youth genuine responsibility in ordering their shared lives. Your reorganization of curriculum into conceptual units and the limiting of subjects and materials to enable greater educational depth have in our time become challenges that are expanding and being realized on a broad scale. You have replaced imposed discipline in the education of children with exemplary patience. You foresaw the valuable function of educating the individual in an encompassing school community, and with that you pointed out a way of preparing young people to assume their responsibility as a citizen.⁶

The statement accurately indicates the general impression of Paul Geheeb's contributions as an educator but overlooks the more sensitive qualities of Paul Geheeb, the humanist, who realized that genuine education also required a good deal of subtle interaction between the individual and his peers, between one's creative imagination and his immediate reality, between living and learning. The focal point in every educational endeavor had to begin with the self as a complex, growing entity and remain continually aware of what was being won or lost in the process of developing character and responsive social values. Human education, Geheeb realized, could not select a single aspect of human nature, i.e., intelligence, and stuff it full of abstract data without destroying the balance and integrity of the learner. Complex as it was, the process of acquiring useful individual knowledge required time for growth and reflection, assimilation and development, investigation and cognition.

Arbitrary teaching by means of threats, fear, and failure only forced students to sacrifice their self-respect and submit helplessly to the powers of authority or to defend themselves by withdrawing into the apparent inner safety and isolation of fantasy and reticence. If submission to a dominant power yielded only two-dimensional adults at one extreme, withdrawal seemed even more damaging to those sensitive children who retreated within themselves to hide from the brutality of a world they could neither fight nor comprehend. Their lives became totally lost to society once they concealed themselves behind walls of lonely introspection and cold resignation.

Geheeb's answer to the dangers of oppressive authority in education was to adjust learning in a flexible and natural manner that would encourage involvement as the best form of self-motivation for students on their own terms. The learning environment, he insisted, must expose each student to a variety of opportunities to examine, choose, evaluate, and then accept as the self and situation required. The learning community and curriculum design of Geheeb's schools therefore consciously confronted young people with a deliberate reality in which they were compelled to act and react in a personal and positive manner. The result, Geheeb assumed, would yield a formation of character compatible with one's natural disposition, conjoined with an abundant knowledge of self and one's world at some responsible point between narrow conformity and empty escapism. It was no shallow admonition on Geheeb's part when he encouraged his students with the words of Pindar for the sake of the world and themselves: "Become that person who you are!"

II

Certainly, a theoretical underpinning was necessary to organize and maintain the programs of Geheeb's schools, but what counted for him most in the last analysis was the student's immediate reality, i.e., the daily routines, the quality and degree of contact between teachers and students, the relationships of students to each other, the day by day choices of action and events, the discoveries of curiosity about intellectual problems, etc. All of those individual and unpredictable (apparently) minor events seem to give the academic community its freshness and excitement. But Paul Geheeb dedicated himself to concrete situations, refusing to take the time to put his pedagogical methods and theories systematically on paper. Perhaps for that reason Geheeb has remained partially overlooked by educators in spite of his significant contributions. How can one write about him and his work if the documents are lacking? Other methods must be used: methods of oral inquiry of those who knew him, or (even better) by close observation of the *Ecole d'Humanité*, the school he directed up to the time of his death in 1961. His *Odenwaldschule* can still be studied for data on his original efforts, but the recent fortunes and the former misfortunes of German history, not to mention Geheeb's long personal absence from that school, have allowed it to be diverted in some respects from its original goals.⁷ The *Ecole d'Humanité*, however, has with only minor changes continued to provide the open education and the community environment that its founder originally created.

The *Ecole* has preserved Geheeb's attitudes about a thorough education which must nevertheless remain adaptable to the needs of the students. Aside from the regular courses, options exist for independent study, special research projects, agreed upon tasks, and individual tutorials, especially for older students who are honestly motivated by the desire to do advanced work in certain areas.⁸ Neither tests nor marks are used as a carrot or a stick; because all learning is done in small groups, the teachers do not need abstract symbols of success to describe the students and their work. Written reports give greater detail and personal commentaries offer valuable insights into the character as well as the accomplishments of the learner. Freedom to expand and explore interests now and then should not be discouraged by the image of a transcript or by the pretended importance of an extra hour or two in a formal class. An episode from among Geheeb's many experiences exemplifies the principle quite well: "Thomas Mann's sixteen year old son, Klaus, wrote poems and novels. He resisted the inclination to attend classes regularly. Often he simply remained in bed in the morning

and when Mr. Geheeb, the director of the school, knocked on the door of his room, he would get the answer from the student, 'Please don't bother me; I'm writing!' At that Geheeb would usually withdraw. Some laughed about it, but other wrinkled their foreheads in troubled consternation."⁹

What often does not look like part of the curriculum in Geheeb's schools nevertheless remains an essential component of the composite education. Students must help with the tasks of service for others in the school, i.e., cleaning, kitchen help, grounds and building maintenance, etc. But equally important nowadays, especially in the in-between times, every effort is made to prevent the self-suppressing and dulling influences of twentieth century escapism from self and community. Life is simple and Spartan in the school; much time must be spent out-of-doors, aware of nature and wind and weather, if only in the process of going from building to building, taking a short field trip, hiking and skiing, or perhaps occasionally working with farmers in the vicinity. The food is simple, and the students must help in its preparation. Pocket money is limited.¹⁰ Smoking and alcoholic beverages are not allowed; nor are other materialistic and superficial distractors of our time. No radios or record players are allowed in the rooms, for example, for they encourage too much passive quiescence on the part of the listener and discourage one from becoming actively creative. With time and few distractions, the students can cultivate resourcefulness and a greater awareness of the world about them.

Although there is still a good deal of freedom and choice evident in the *Ecole d'Humanité*, one should not assume that Geheeb advocated a permissive and unstructured school system. In a certain sense, rules of study, standards of achievement, responsible behavior, and work obligations remain more numerous in the *Ecole d'Humanité* than in many so-called traditional schools.¹¹ The *Ecole* prepares its students either for the demanding Swiss and German *Reifezeugnis*, a European high school degree that allows its possessor to enter a European university at a modified graduate level; and it also offers a complete American high school program with instruction in English and awards to those students who wish to attend an American university. The fact that it is widely recognized and accepted can be confirmed by the long list of distinguished colleges and universities which the graduates of the *Ecole* have attended over the previous decades. According to the current directors, "The academic achievement here becomes quite impressive as students find their natural motivation to work, but you cannot force students who are resisting you to learn well." And in the spirit of Paul Geheeb, they add, "Achievement seems to come easily once the student has come to terms with himself, but that takes time. One must often be very patient. And one must take risks to educate well. You need to trust the child's desire to grow. Under the proper conditions, learning continues to take place everywhere, even in those moments of quiet and withdrawal, . . . in those moments of personal reflection. Very often it's there that new possibilities of understanding and new insights present themselves, not only for these students but perhaps for us all."¹²

Such observations, finally, seem to confirm in essence a deep understanding of Paul Geheeb, who knew that the final outcome of individual education was always more than the totality of what a teacher could concretely give to a student. The teacher, we recall from his opening address to the students of the *Odenwaldschule*, could only help the student along his way, but in the last analysis it is always the student as an individual who must develop independently and determine the direction and the distance he wants to travel in this life. Almost a century has passed since Paul Geheeb first began to reflect on such ideas and attitudes, and as a result he has left a larger mark on the philosophy of education than the historians of education have until recently acknowledged. But, fortunately, Geheeb's contributions cannot be ignored because they continue to persist where they retain the greatest amount of durability and vitality, — in *practice*, in those schools that Paul Geheeb created and in the minds of those he educated and influenced.

Notes

- ¹ Paul Geheeb, *Briefe*. Ed. Walter Schaefer (Ernst Klett; Stuttgart, 1970). "Introduction" *passim*.
- ² *vide* Paul Geheeb's speech manuscript for the opening of the *Odenwaldschule*, 1910. Quoted also in Wilhelm Kosse, "Das pädagogische Programm Paul Geheeb's," *Paedagogik Heute*, Nr. 4 (Finken-Verlag; Oberursel/Taunus, 1968). 138.
- ³ *Cf.* Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat*, Robert Musil's *Toerless*, Frank Wedekind's *Fruehlings-Erwachen*, etc.
- ⁴ *op.cit.* Kosse, "Das pädagogische Programm Paul Geheeb's."
- ⁵ Henry R. Cassirer, "Ein kühner Reformator und Menschenerzieher," *UNESCO Kurier*, Jg. 3, Nr. 6 (June, 1962). 21.
- ⁶ Document of the German Ministry of Education. Quoted in brochure of the *Ecole d'Humanité* (Goldern, Switzerland).
- ⁷ *vide* Walter Schaefer, "Die Odenwaldschule seit 1945," *Paedagogik Heute*, Nr. 4 (Finken-Verlag; Oberursel/Taunus, 1968). 149-159. Also, Armin Luethi, "Ecole d'Humanité," *ibid.* 165-6.
- ⁸ A pattern of development appears to have established itself for those who remain in the *Ecole d'Humanité* for three years or more. The first year is one of orientation and adjustment. Students adapt to the new and special conditions of the school and build confidence slowly. In the second year students develop a natural inclination to study and pursue interests. Greater self-awareness, new insights, and greater initiative develop. The third year brings closer involvement with the school. Energies are freer from self-concern, and the students commit themselves fully to learning and to community leadership roles. Most third-year students are bilingual and can take full advantage of the wide range of subjects in both German and in English. Many begin a third language. Virtually all have learned to work efficiently and effectively at their tasks.
- Because of this recurring pattern, the administration encourages enrollment for a period of two years at least (although in special cases students may be accepted for a single year).
- ⁹ Peter de Mendelssohn, *Klaus Mann zum Gedächtnis*. Amsterdam, 1950. p. 23. Quoted also in Paul Geheeb's *Briefe*, Ed. Walter Schaefer, *op.cit.*, p. 202. N.B. that tolerance did not prevent Geheeb from expressing his rage against Klaus Mann years later in a letter to his father, Thomas Mann, when Geheeb felt himself satirized by Klaus Mann as "Der Alte" in Klaus Mann's book, *Vor dem Leben*. *Vide* Geheeb's letter to Thomas Mann and Thomas Mann's reply, *Briefe, ob.cit.*, p. 43 & p. 194.
- ¹⁰ Geheeb observed the conflict between modern wealth and personal value, simply pointing out that "most of our pupils come from wealthy or at least very comfortable families, but all of our children here must be educated to become thrifty and cherish simplicity in their behavior and attitude, for our happiness in life must someday be founded on our own thoroughness and dedication to our work." Paul Geheeb, *Briefe, op.cit.*, p. 43.
- ¹¹ *vide* Geheeb's letter of 11.30.39 to Adolphe Ferrière re. *autoritative Erziehung* and *individuelle Differenzierung*. N.B. also comments on Neill, founder of the "permissive" Summerhill School. *op.cit.*, *Briefe*, pp. 52-3.
- ¹² Remarks given at an interview with the directors of the school at Goldern, Hasliberg, Switzerland, in April of 1982. The current directors, Armin Luethi and Natalie Luethi-Peterson, worked with Paul Geheeb to the last. Edith Geheeb-Cassirer participated in the administration of the school until her death in 1982.