Internationalism Builds Better Schools

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Schoolteachers — both Germans and Americans alike — should remember that their mutual relations in the field of education did not begin in 1945, but go back through more than a century of interwoven interests.

Present German-American educational relationships, therefore, cannot be viewed in the light of the "occupied" and the "occupiers," but must be in the spirit of friendly and willing exchange of ideas as has been the case in the past.

Americans are always eager to learn. Americans are not in Germany today to foist upon the Germans our ideas on the organization of their school system. We are here in Germany to help and advise the Germans in their task of developing their educational system into a living and vital part of a democratic society.

The German educational system of the past had many good aspects and has contributed to educational methods now in use in both European countries and in America. For more than 100 years, American educators have studied the German educational system with great interest and have applied many of its better points to educational processes in the United States.

German-American relations in education began in a curious and roundabout way. In 1831 the French educator, Victor Cousin, wrote a report to his government on the Prussian school system. Three years later it was published in English in New York and parts of it appeared in all pedagogical periodicals throughout the United States.

Through this report the ideals of compulsory school attendance and state provision for public education first fired American minds. In Massachusetts, a special government department was thereupon established as early as 1835.

Two years later, the state of Ohio sent Calvin Stowe, one of its leading educators, to Germany. Stowe, whose wife, as the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," has been widely read in Germany, visited Prussia and southern Germany. His report, which the school authorities distributed to every school in Ohio, pointed to the higher educational standards of the teachers and the better educational methods employed in primary schools in Germany.

The report gained wide attention and was later published in five other states and distributed among schools and educators. This marked the beginning of a mutually beneficial intercourse in the educational field between the United States and Germany.

Later in the century, one of America's most prominent educators, Horace Mann, visited Europe on a tour of educational methods. He returned to the United States with a report on the school systems of England, Scotland, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany which belongs to the classic American literature on pedagogy.

In America, however, Mann's report failed to win wholehearted approval and in numerous cases gave rise to vehement protests, especially from Boston school teachers. There were some, as there are in every country, whose national feelings were hurt by the assertion that certain things abroad were better than they were at home.

To them Horace Mann retorted: "I would think it extremely strange, if we could not find valuable hints for our own work in other countries, whether these be warnings or good examples. There are many things abroad, from which we could learn to our advantage. If the Prussian school teachers have better methods of teaching reading, writing, grammar and geography and thus obtain better results in half the time, we should adopt these methods. This does not mean that we should simultaneously adopt their attitude of absolute submission to the government and blind acquiescence in church dogmas."

This progressive view that we can profit by studying the educational systems of other countries and adapting their best features to home conditions has gradually gained ground in the minds of American school teachers. Today we owe an enormous debt to other nations whose educational achievements we have adopted.

The German democrats who came to America during and after the German revolution in the middle of the last century brought us the institution of the Kindergarten which has retained its German name and spread throughout the country.
New German school textbooks were discussed when almost 100 American, German and other European educators of note gathered at Heidelberg in mid-July for a six-week international social studies workshop sponsored by HICOG to develop plans for improved social education in German schools. Examining new books are, l-r., Dr. Read; Elsie M. Beck, director of Social Studies, Detroit Public Schools; Dr. Theodor Beevere, Wurttemberg-Baden state minister of education, and Allen King, US consultant in education. (Photo by Jacoby, PRD HICOG)

Later, America carefully studied the ideas on child education put forward by Johann Friedrich Herbart. A Herbart association was instituted in the United States and its members discussed Herbart’s theories at their meetings and wrote about them in their books. American educators examined and analyzed these new concepts until the progressing knowledge of child development led to still newer ideas which seemed no longer consistent with Herbart’s theories.

AMERICA’S PROGRESS in the field of child psychology, too, has been influenced by German thinking. The first Americans who supported these new ideas were followers of the great German psychologist, Wilhelm Wundt of Leipzig, and in child psychology research close contact with German scientists was constantly maintained.

The concept of the intelligence quotient, widely discussed in America for many years, was taken from the German scientist William Stern who, after the sad events of the 1930’s, took refuge in an American university where he found a new field of activity.

American universities, too, owe much to their German counterparts. Until well into the second part of the last century the study of advanced sciences in American universities was still in the initial stages of development, and many of our best men in all branches of science obtained their final education in Germany.

Goettingen University, especially, counted numerous Americans among its students. In its early days, Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the first major American university to devote its studies chiefly to graduate work, followed the German example in many ways.

Prior to the first world war, the lively exchange of ideas between Germany and the United States was at its most active in the field of vocational schools. After 1900 American high schools developed into schools for pupils from all ranks of life rather than only for those who intended to go on to higher education and expanded their courses to include subjects giving practical as well as theoretical knowledge.

At that time the well-known German educator, Georg Kerschensteiner, was trying to give young people attending German vocational schools a general education along the lines of their respective vocations. It was no coincidence that these two movements — the progressive development of our high schools on vocational lines and the development of the German vocational schools on more general lines — sought contact with one another.

On his study trip to the United States Georg Kerschensteiner obtained valuable hints to further his own work and at the same time gave useful tips to American school teachers. His name ranks high in educational circles in the United States and particularly in vocational schooling.

GERMAN-AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL relations, interrupted by the first world conflict, were quickly resumed at the close of the war. Far-seeing German school teachers, hoping to find new ideas to help them in the reformation of the German school system went to America to study democratic education. On their return to Germany they made the name of John Dewey, one of our most outstanding educators, known throughout the country.

An exchange system for university professors between the two countries was worked out. One of America’s major pedagogic colleges, Teachers College of Columbia University, made study trips to foreign schools a regular part of a future teacher’s education and established an institute for comparative pedagogy which made a yearly report on the status of education in other countries. Leading educators of Columbia University made it their life-work to study foreign, and especially the German, systems of education.

Hitler and a world war rudely interrupted these relations and their resumption after 1945 was strained by the relationship of victor and vanquished. In the early days of occupation, things had to be done which appeared unfriendly and which have left their scars. Certainly not everything that was done was good and right. War and occupations are always military affairs; in the educational field the undoing of Nazi injustice was as unpleasant and painful as in many another less sensitive area.

It is for this reason that Americans and Germans cannot view their present day educational relationships in the light of war and occupation. Rather both nationalities should go back over the record of years of understanding and should strive to work together in a spirit of friendly co-operation which will link not only Americans and Germans but all educators in all countries all over the world.

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