

# **The Werkplaats:** **Children's Community**

**A grand experiment with children  
in progressive education as experienced  
and interpreted by:**

**Jurriaan Plesman (1961)**

# Foreword

The manuscript you are about to read is about my recollection of my experience just prior and during World War II in a progressive school in Holland, called the “Werkplaats”. This community for children was founded by Kees Boeke and his wife Bette.

Progressive education refers to a movement among educationists during the 19th and 20th century that aimed at overhauling the educational system in most Western countries. It aimed at making the child the starting point of education - that is child-centered teaching - unlike the kind of teaching in most orthodox schools where educational programs derive primarily from higher authorities, the state, the church or a body of “experts”.

I wrote this manuscript in 1961 - nearly 40 years ago - mainly for the benefits of friends and family, and as time went on that manuscript disappeared. It recently turned up among papers of my older brother, now deceased, in Canada and my niece returned it to me in Australia.

My time at the Werkplaats has left an indelible impression on me. It implanted in me a love for knowledge and of learning, but it also made me very critical of the educational institutions in Australia - the schools and universities - that profess to pass on “education” to the next generation. But that is to be expected: products of progressive education feel strongly what is and *what is not* education!

Many parents are looking for alternatives to our present day educational institutions. In Australia the choice is between state schools and private schools (mainly Catholic), both of which offer teacher-oriented courses and which differ only in the thoroughness of orthodoxy. Australian universities dominate this orthodoxy with an iron grip.

My intention is to leave this manuscript with some of the major Australian libraries in pdf format, appropriate in this age of computer communication. This would allow any future student of progressive education to have free electronic access to my experience as a student in a progressive school.

Thanks to the internet I discovered that the Werkplaats is still alive and kicking. The Werkplaats Home page can be found at <http://www.wpkeesboeke.nl> but I must confess that I know little of what is left of the educational principles as enunciated by Kees Boeke. I would be particularly interested in the social structure of the Werkplaats.

This last century has witnessed revolutionary changes in the social and political environment. In 1961 there were no computers, no internet, the fear of Russian communism has dissipated. Social relations within families have radically altered due to globalization and the new religion - economic rationalism!

Therefore we may expect that radical changes has taken place in the present structure of the Werkplaats. Progressive education is not static, it is dynamic and adaptable to an ever-changing environment.

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1999

## The WERKPLAATS children's community.

Once upon a time it was believed that a school without authoritarian discipline would be an impossibility. Undoubtedly such a notion sprang from Plato and Aristotle and was never questioned until this century. The Werkplaats Children's Community, founded by Kees and his wife, Bette Boeke, and their friends proved this notion false, as did many other progressive schools.

This is an attempt to explain the structure and activities of this school by one of Kees' ex-pupils. However, it is impossible to attempt to parallel and essay with Kees' determination in his pioneering work.

Kees said: "A taste of freedom is contagious", and he gave the writer of this article such a taste in the midst of German occupation when he attended the school as just a young fellow. This quotation is very appropriate and significant and might serve as a theme for Kees' adventure.

"We know how wrong it is to rule or to be ruled by fear" (History of Education, Vol 3: New plan for education: Holland).

Further reading:

"The Werkplaats Adventure" by Wyatt Rawson (1956) V. Stuart, London. (One copy available at the NSW Stat Library, also indexed under Kees Boeke)

"Progressive Schools - Their principles and practices" by L.P. Pekin (This is a trenchant and humorous criticism of orthodox schools applicable to Australian schools in many ways)

WERKPLAATS is a Dutch word for “Workshop” and the name given by Kees Boeke and his wife, Bette, to the greatest of all schools in the world. I will use “Werkplaats” and “Workshop” interchangeably in this article.

I hope the reader notices the bias with which I introduce this unique experiment in progressive education for I was one of Kees’ pupils for four happy years starting from about 1938 to 1942. I was about 10 or 11 when my mother sent me to this school. The German occupation may have closed down the school during the war years, but they could not kill Kees’ and Bette’s spirit that survived the inhumanities of the war.

The school, at present about 1000 (in 1961), is situated in picturesque Bilthoven, a peaceful township in the province of Utrecht, Holland. It is surrounded by pine-tree forests, a romantic playground for children imbued with the spirit of adventure and idyllic for the fostering of a love-affair between nature and students.

Here children go to school the normal five days a week to school to an environment that advocates no fear, punishment, compulsion, privileges, classes, masters or examinations. Non-existent are barriers between the sexes and ages, for all are equal in this community of children. Here children as well as teachers sit in parliament, councils and various committees arguing out their problems and conducting their affairs. Here they play, sing, perform and study together.

It sounds like a fairy-tale; one come true!

Orthodox pedagogues would immediately picture children indulging in an orgy embracing all three vices - the kind of scene that the media like to dish up. But the Werkplaats is at least as orderly, if not more so, than an orthodox school and is conspicuous for its absence of vandalism and bad manners. Visitors are surprised by the startling frankness but friendliness, that is so characteristic of ‘workshop’ children. At first they may be puzzled by the relationship between teachers and pupils which allow both parties to refer to each other by their Christian names. Moreover, pupils are called “werkers” (workers) and teachers, “mede-werkers” (Co-workers).

This school with its parliament, teaching methods and institutions, is not the result of a master plan. It is simply the realization of an embryonic idea that was fertilized with such enthusiasm that today, the school that was originally to be nothing but a family affair, is impervious to limitations and increasing its members daily.

### **Kees’ and Bette’s Family School**

How is all this possible? One day in 1926 Kees (pronounced Kase) Boeke and Bette Boeke refused to send their children to the state school and set about educating their children themselves. In those days Kees was scorned and called a crank, an odd visionary, a sympathetic fool for believing that a community could be created without authority. We should never underestimate the importance of Kees’ wife Bette, in her role giving unconditional support to Kees’ endeavours in creating a children’s community.

But his small band of intellectual friends knew him as an intelligent man, concerned about the prospect of his children having to go to a school where vested interests of society and ignorant teachers would implant in his children the very same notions he had preached against during the first world war; indeed the

very same concepts literally which were caned into school-children without which this senseless butchery would have been impossible. He was not alone, for all over the world educational pioneers were working out schemes to break the vicious cycle of education and its social consequences. His little family school grew gradually as friends sent children to Kees for their education and thus, the school started in 1926.

Perhaps why this school ultimately became a success is mainly because Kees did not start off with any fixed idea of what this school ought to be. He never condemned punishment outright but in his mind he posed the question: "How can I teach and maintain order in this little community without the force of authority?" This is the theme of the "Werkplaats" adventure, and experiment that as yet has not been finished. Why the eyes of progressive educationists are fixed on the "Workshop" is, because it has reached horizons that no other progressive school approached.

All familiar with the problem of progressive education will be amazed that this school in 1961 accounts for about 1000 pupils, housed in three differently located buildings and is still maintaining the ideals that Kees was pursuing nearly 40 years ago. It has reached the University level and is battling the orthodox outside institutions - the state and universities, who insist on imposing yearly exams for the school to be acceptable. (We will return to this battle later.)

### **The sociocratic method**

In order to understand the structure of the "Workshop" we must always go back to the early days when the school was just a family affair in Kees' house. He wanted to teach and maintain order; but he wanted neither to reward nor punish, for this would imply that he had the authority to know the right from the wrong. How then could he impart the accumulated knowledge of civilization?

The method that eventually emerged, he called the sociocratic method. When he was a missionary with the Quakers in the Middle East, it was a practice of this body to come to a decision by agreement. It is a Quaker's belief that we all possess an "inner light" that gave us spirituality and knowledge. This was a formal procedure whereby the leader would stand up and raise the problem to be solved. Each one starting from the youngest upward would stand up and say what he thought of it. There was no voting and all must agree. By this method he would make each child from young to old 'speak up'; for it was essential, firstly, for the leader to know what was in the mind of the child, and secondly, to make a child think. By teaching the child to 'speak up' he tried to foster some independent thoughts; to create a mind that instead of being passive would be active. As if he wanted to activate the "inner light" in each child. But soon Kees found out that once they were taught to 'speak up', they would not stop talking. They talked all at the same time. From this arose the custom of raising both hands. Instead of everybody shouting "be quiet", one just raised one's arms and remained silent, and waited until everyone in the group did likewise. Notice it is difficult to talk with raised arms!

Thus Kees was faced with the problem that it was not so much a matter of getting a child to 'speak his mind' - which he considered the foundation of

democratic society - but a matter of maintaining some sort of order. Kees was a methodical man! Obviously the Quaker procedure was far too difficult for children to follow. He wanted to preserve the spontaneity with which children 'spoke their mind'. He dropped the Quaker procedure and agreement was reached simply by 'talking things over'. This 'talk over' approach under the direction of a selected (not elected) chairman is the method used throughout the school. Obviously, 1000 pupils could not be expected to have a 'talk over' in a great hall, but this sociocratic method is still used in tutorial groups consisting of 12 to 20 children, and in the central council or parliament which were made up from representatives of the tutorial groups and at staff meetings. It must be remembered that the sociocratic method aims at getting total agreement with decisions by arguing it out; and it is at this stage interesting to note that children take less time to reach an agreement than adults. Some staff meetings have lasted many hours, but is is still considered essential.

Children appear to have naturally more flexible minds than adults. They are more adaptable and less likely to hang on at all costs. At the 'talk over' and in councils the teachers or co-workers are on a equal basis, and because of their greater experience they have influence on the final result. However, it does not follow that they have always the last word.

This sociocratic method then forms the basis of the relationship between members of the children's community, regardless of the status, age or sex. The government at the time of the school's infancy was one of direct democracy (meaning direct participation in one's communal affairs and government). Kees did not dream of nor prepared for a school larger than 50. By now he had engaged two excellent teachers (Kees was not a qualified teacher) and the school grew in numbers. Accordingly it became increasingly difficult to apply the sociocratic method and gradually the principle of representation by delegates came into existence, whereby tutorial groups sent their representatives to the central council or parliament. But votes were still not taken.

This is a general picture. It must not be taken to mean that this procedure was fixed. Very important matters, probably affecting everybody in the school could be taken up in the sociocratic method in the great hall, for example whether or not to accept an invitation to another school for a Bach performance, or a question of order (there is no discipline - it is called order). Again something might be announced at the communal lunch-hour to be discussed in the tutorial groups and to be reported to the central council. In other words,. wherever possible direct participation was to be preferred.

Certain difficulties were the natural result of students being allowed to subjects of their own liking. Inevitably cliques formed tending to separate the units of the student body. This is why the sociocratic method is so significant, because of these problems were solved by the school as a body. The splitting up of the school into three different locations was another serious challenge to the family atmosphere of the school; perhaps this wedge thrust upon it by circumstances proved to be its strongest point.

The relationship of the school with the outside world is controlled by the staff. Again the sociocratic method is applied. They also arrange courses, discuss students and agree on general policies. The disadvantages of the sociocratic method have been pointed out, but the great advantage from the point of view

of a teacher or 'co-worker', is that he has an equal share in the running of the school. This contributed in attracting adept teachers. Moreover each teacher is eager to experiment with teaching methods. Without compulsion he cannot make students follow courses that are stultifying. The question of compulsory courses has slightly changed due to outside pressure. I shall discuss this later. But whilst on the subject, it is pointed out that compulsion at the Workshop has a different connotation from that at an orthodox school. Let us take a case of a boy I remember who came from an orthodox school. He professed to be interested in carpentry and nothing else. He hated 'intellectual' subjects. He soon became a master in the carpentry and woodwork section and then took up metal work. I would imagine that the tutor of the boy gave a hint to the chemistry co-worker at the staff meeting. The latter, whose laboratory was full of wonders, asked the boy to make some didactic materials for the chemistry section. It was a machine for making artificial lightning. It was not long after that the boy took up courses in physics and chemistry, with the result that he became involved in a mathematics course. Perhaps this was what the staff had aimed for. Is this compulsory? The very same boy also built a miniature cosmos in the steeple of the school, showing the position of various stars. It was not long before he joined an astronomy course.

### **Flirtations with anarchy**

How can order be maintained without the use of punishment? Kees was certainly tampering with this well established institution of the Western world. He abhorred force and authority, which he shunned at all costs. I remember one day when his bicycle was stolen. All he said was "By Jove, he must have needed it very badly, whoever he is", and left it at that.

Kees was an idealist but he never lectured on morality. Maybe he thought that if all children were innocent, then it is just a matter of determining at what point of life they are liable to be guilty. The law solves this by reference to a birthday - a mere number. Surely this would be absurd. Or again he might have thought that a wrong can only be righted by the wrongdoer himself. In this case, inflicted punishment is just another kind of wrong to match the first one, without anybody gaining anything.

I could only speculate on Kees' thoughts on these matters; my paraphrasing would merely do injustice to a mind like his.

It is more likely that Kees, being a practical person came to the conclusion that punishment caused resentment in the wrongdoer and unrest in the group as a whole. Used as a process of Pavlovian conditioning it was defective and certainly it did not leave the child any the wiser. Thus he began experimenting with other methods of maintaining order.

In the little family school, misbehaviour was treated simply as a matter concerning the group. Misbehaviour is assumed to be something not agreed upon by the group. Thus misbehaviour was either a breach of agreement or something that the group had never had the chance to agree upon. The fact that he was older and had different experiences (I am trying to avoid the word 'wiser', for Kees, being a Quaker, does not believe himself to be wiser than anybody else) did not exclude him from the right to either disagree or agree with a certain type of behaviour. This could be settled by a little conference. The

question was raised - "Why did little Susie misbehave?" The children trained to 'speak their mind' would all start thinking for a possible answer. What is misbehaving? Surely they could not tell. Susie is the only one who could explain and so they asked her: "...why did you do that?"

Susie would give an explanation. If it was a good one, somebody would come to her rescue and a lively discussion would follow about the morals of her conduct. If it were a bad one, then the best way out was to say you were sorry. But 'sorry' is just an empty word, the exclamation of a state of mind, no doubt demanding some action.

All the 'sorries' bottled up within would surely lead to a guilty mind, which again would distort freedom of thought.

So it was better to get the feeling of sorry out of your system by doing something about it, anything at all. Thus invariably the little conference would finish up with the child doing something about it. "What are you going to do about it?" was asked; and it did not matter how much and what.

The emphasis on this conference was to find out what went wrong with the system, rather than accuse the child. This method furthermore enabled Kees to understand the motives of a child; it enabled the group to learn about somebody else wishes and to respect the individual. The group learned not to judge, but to understand and to review their own system. The wrongdoer, if he felt guilty, could voluntary cleanse his feeling of guilt, by doing something about it.

The same principles are followed today in a council set up for investigating matters of order at the "Workshop". It is called the Committee of order. When I was at the school it was called the "Ronde", a name derived from Kees Boeke's making the round of the tutorial rooms.

Each room had an agenda on which anybody could put his name, indicating that he had a complaint to make.

With Kees Boeke as chairman and four senior committee members selected from the school, the "Ronde" was called to discuss cases. If something was found to be wrong with the system then it could be reported to the school's parliament. The child could, of course, defend the complaint made against him or her and bring friends to help him argue the case. Private quarrels were also settled and Kees and the senior members would know what was going on in the school. No punishment was meted out but an offender would be asked what he intended doing about it. The answer to this question was up to the wrongdoer. If he felt guilty he might offer to do a chore for the group and the whole matter was settled.

As time went on Kees Boeke would leave the chairmanship to another co-worker and later to the children themselves. Today it hears the unimportant or less serious cases.

The "Ronde" still sits in very very serious cases and is now a kind of Court of Appeal with Kees a chairman.

Since the members of the Committee are selected for only three months, they are not likely to be very severe; the tables may be turned next time!

An audience may be present and in very serious cases of misconduct the parent are invited. This is because it cannot mete out punishment.

Let me hasten to add, that this has happened so seldom, that it is hardly

worth mentioning. But as will be seen later, conflicts are usually resolved, before they come up for hearing. One might put your name down in anger on the agenda, but as soon as tempers cool, your name is off again.

### **How order is maintained**

The system of maintaining order cannot be left without further elaboration. This is the greatest obstacle to orthodox teachers.

There are many other influences that maintain some order without the use of force. An enumeration would be found in any work on group psychology or anthropology. Children want to live in an orderly stable society; disorder disturbs them.

It must not be imagined that the ordinary code of ethics has no place in the "Workshop". Nor should one underestimate the influence that co-workers exercise over the workers. There is a leadership based on the qualities of their character, not one based on force or authority, on a principle of reward and punishment.

Besides, leadership is meaningless, unless it is in a direction or in a situation. Leaders always pop up in different situations, and different situations require different types of leaders.

The easy interactions among the "Workshop" Children's Community has made it possible to produce leaders for practically any kind of situation and this has literally saved the "Workshop" from the brink of failure as the reader will discover later.

Let us consider how this extraordinary idea of maintaining order without force works out in particular cases.

Here are three illustrations;

- ◇ Late coming by the individual
- ◇ open aggression by the individual
- ◇ late coming of a group as a body

### **Late coming by the individual**

When I was at the Workshop no serious difficulties were encountered. The periods were so arranged that popular periods - dancing, acting and debating etc. - were at the beginning and end of both the day and the week. For example Monday morning started off with the school's choir, a very popular event. Consequently, if a child were late, he just missed out and that was all there was to it. It was agreed not to disturb the group if you were late and to wait for a break. I remember being late for rehearsal of a Bach symphony. I was a member of the choir. This was an event in which the whole school participated, orchestra and all. Kees, having been a professional musician, conducted the performance. I grew impatient with the length of the music and became eager to join. So I tried to sneak in around the back and made my way through the choir behind the orchestra.

Kees caught me and immediately stopped in the middle of the performance and asked the other children to make way so that I could reach my position in the choir. He waited patiently with the baton suspended in the air and looking at me asked "ready? Now where were we?...Let us go back to bar 32

at the beginning of the adagio”.

I never sneaked around the back again!

### **Open aggression by the individual**

Another example of maintaining order without force deals with a type of aggression that has discouraged and baffled so many progressive educationists. “Give them a finger, and they take the whole hand” sums it up neatly. It is like a spontaneous rebellion without apparent motives. Vandalism and hooliganism are other illustrations which collectively might be called “student riots”. “Compulsive iconoclasm” would be better term, for the aggressor has little control over his behaviour and the objects of compassion appear to be the images or symbols of a repressive society.

The phenomenon does not appear to occur among children that have grown up in the “Workshop”, but rather among those that have come from other schools. This seems to suggest the following explanation. Boys brought up under an umbrella of authority naturally grow up with a resentment against it. When they suddenly find their freedom they will give full play to this resentment at the mere image of the old society. The deliverance from authority also brings with it a sense of insecurity; for authority offers protection, especially against responsibility. The defencelessness and consequent bewilderment adds to the irrationality of the emancipated boy.

After he has familiarized himself with his new environment, he cannot help seeing the ghost of his previous school, teachers, buildings, windows and walls. These then become objects of his “iconoclastic” aggression. When he sees this ghost lying at his feet, begging his cooperation, he naturally feels like giving it a last kick.

This what happens often to new arrivals, or rather what happens to the unfortunate co-worker. To all intents and purposes he still looks like a teacher.

Group leaders, whom such a boy has helped to be selected are at first little successful in keeping the boy in place, and they are usually told so.

Coming from an orthodox school I went through a stage like that. I was uncommonly rude to a co-worker. I wanted to find out how far I could go. After an incident - which inter alia was quite funny or so I thought - the co-worker put my name on the agenda. This meant that I had to face the “Ronde” and since a co-worker had made the complaint I would have had a hard job explaining myself.

At last the better side of my nature surfaced. I felt miserable, shameful and lonely, for nobody sympathised with me. At the “Workshop” nobody gangs up against a co-worker. The prospect of facing Kees and other boys, with probably an audience did not particularly appealed to me. Feeling sorry for myself (sympathy that ought to have been directed to the co-worker) I plucked up my courage and apologised to the co-worker.

After the close of the period I was alone with him, he appeared to have forgotten the incident, and said that I would soon get used to the ways of the “Werkplaats” and he proceeded to show me his latest paintings. “What do you think of these? Not bad for a beginner like me? That woman’s head looks a bit overweight. Why don’t you try it? I am usually in the art-room during ‘siesta’ and pot around with brushes. You ought to meet Jan who is a very good artist

and he might help you along.”

There was no lecturing to me on my misconduct. He was just somebody like me doodling on paper. He rubbed my name off the agenda to my great relief, and this was as close as I ever came to the “Ronde”.

The staff expects most children from orthodox schools to go through an iconoclastic period. In fact they worry more if this spontaneous rebellion does not appear, for this might indicate that the child prefers the security and paternal influence of authority. This would be inconsistent with self-study, debate, independent thought and voluntary cooperation. These are the principles on which the “Workshop” hinges. Though the reaction may be healthy and necessary for the completion of independence, it is a worry nevertheless. Individual cases are simple to deal with. It needs the skill and patience of the best kind of co-worker. But what if large numbers of students come from other schools?

This is exactly what happened. When the “Workshop” extended courses for admission to the University, suddenly a large number of potential “iconoclast” flooded the school.

Characteristically of the “Workshop”, it accepted the challenge and the staff began various experiments to deal with the new event.

It is enough to say that they succeeded, no doubt with the help of the sociocratic method. Within a period of about two months, these new arrivals were dispersed among the various tutorial groups and only in very exceptional cases did matters of order get as far as the Committee of Order.

### **Late coming of the group as a body**

This is perhaps the most interesting illustration of the way in which the “Workshop” solved problems arising in maintaining order without the use of punishment. As an experimental school, it continually faces new situations never trodden by other organisations. As it grows it gets farther away from the simple tenets that the little family school established.

How to preserve these ideals as the school grows may be the theme of the following crisis through which the school went. It also shows how ultimately the sociocratic method and the easy shift of leadership literally saved the “Workshop” from the brink of anarchy as well as from the re-establishment of orthodox authority.

The Dutch Ministry of Education imposed certain regulations on the school, some of which affected the length of the teaching periods. As a result a shift in periods was arranged and to compensate for the loss of some social and popular periods the children voted to add Saturday morning to the school.

In a time when children from orthodox schools flocked to the Senior School, these changes put a heavy strain on the social and therefore orderly structure of the Workshop.

The hidden disease manifested itself in the gradual emergence of “late-coming”, not of individuals but of a significant group in the school. First it was minutes, then five minutes, then a quarter of an hour and then twenty minutes before the school seemed to settle down to work. The Committee of Order started to deal with isolated cases without success. The co-workers raised the question in the school parliament and it was proposed that under these serious

circumstances that the co-workers would stand at the doors and list the names of late-comers. They would then be required to come in early the next day and join the cleaning-squad. The cleaning squad was on a rotation roster and everybody objected that the cleaning squad would be turned into a convict gang. As a result the co-workers just listed names.

However students still arrived late. After a while the co-workers objected that this system interfered with their lectures, that they were getting very unpopular and suggested that this Gestapo job ought to be put into the hands of the students themselves. A special committee of late coming was set up with members standing at the doors listing names.

But this arrangement equally failed. Now late-comers played hide and seek with the watch men and climbed through the windows to avoid them.

Surely this was a crisis! There was something radically wrong with the system!

Finally in a last attempt to solve the dangerous situation the whole school was called for a general "talk over" in the great assembly hall.

Here, as I imagine from similar experience, Kees Boeke stood on the stage and gave one of his unforgettable speeches. He had all the reasons to worry for after all wasn't the school on the way of becoming an orthodox school? His stings of oratory would have moved the emotions of every child. When he was finished all were quiet. The seriousness of the whole situation dawned upon the children's community. They had their heads bowed, a few pinked away a tears perhaps. What had gone wrong with the system?

Then perhaps a girl from Junior School got up and said: "Forgive for saying so Kees, but I don't see what all the fuss is about. Why don't we let the tutorial groups handle this business? We group leaders can list the names and anybody who is late must be in with the ones who come on the early bus the next morning". The hall would be alive again: "That's a new one, we have not tried that yet."

But Kees wanted them to chew over the seriousness and he raised his hand and soon all hands went up until all were silent.

"I suggest that you go back to your tutorial group and discuss this motion. Your reps will report to the President of parliament and he will announce the new rule this afternoon before we go home after folk dancing period."

And so they did, but the president had announced the new rule at communal lunch and so it is, that still today the group leader is responsible for listing names of late-comers in the tutorial groups. This seems to be mere formality, for the list is not used for any other purpose. No doubt some recidivist late-comers would be dealt with in the tutorial group. It seems that the new rule worked and did the trick for the problems of late coming as a body was resolved.

This illustration of what actually happened, shows how how the little girl unwittingly pointed to a return to Kees' little family school - here the tutorial group. At this time perhaps the colour groupings were the units of the school, but these gradually overgrew its limits for the sociocratic method.

The unit of organisation had to be narrowed down further to groups of 12 to 20. This process was already going on but on an informal basis and so that

brings us to the next paragraph.

### **Groupings**

It may be strange to find different groups of students in a school that professes to have no classes. But obviously a school of 1000 pupils cannot be the same as the little family school of Kees Boeke in which groupings were essential. As the school grew in size it was loosely grouped into units representing the mental and intellectual developmental stages of the child. There were colour groups as follows:

<u>Colour</u>	<u>Approximate age</u>
Purple	4 to 6 years
Indigo	6 to 8 years
Blues	8 to 10 years
Green	10 to 12 years
Yellow	12 to 19 years

The latest appearance in this grouping were the indigos. Previously they were called “the little blues”, but they resented being called “little” and selected the name indigo instead. Furthermore, it would be likely that the yellows will also be further subdivided, unless the subsequent strengthening of tutorial groups - as subdivisions of colour groups - has made this unnecessary.

The colours are the colours of the rainbow, blending into one another and symbolises Kees’ wish to preserve the unity of the family group. These colours refer rather to mental age groups than scholastic abilities, although these two factors tend to coincide.

This is then the social arrangement and the building is designed in such a way that there is free movement between the colour groups. We find blues play with the greens behind a movable partition but study with the blues.

Or again, if a child of nine is more at home with children of 10 and 11, he might be put with the greens. This is possible since the courses of study are not related to colour-groups. When I was at the Werkplaats, I was never aware of ages; all children were just members of the community.

Thus the child grows up and there is never a sudden change from one colour to another, furthermore this may happen at any time of the year without interfering with one’s individual studies.

Transfers between colour groups and tutorial groups are easy, for all study individually in principle, although coincidence of groups and colours is not neglected in the choice of the colours and groupings.

The splitting up of the school into three different buildings has upset the smooth graduation of the colour groups, but these are all represented in the school parliament. The school made strenuous efforts to keep the community together by organizing communal study projects, camps and other social activities.

The subdivision of the colour groups into tutorial groups is the latest development. Whereas the colour groups are horizontal sections (mental ages) of the school, the tutorial groups are vertical sections of the colour group. The tutorial group comes closest to the family, consisting of a group of children of

different ages.

These are now the units of the school of 12 to 20 pupils with a co-worker in charge. Thus a co-worker has two functions in the school; one as a teacher in a subject or speciality and two, as a member of his tutorial group.

All children go to their lectures in the morning and do “free work” in the afternoon. The self-study technique in the Workshop is such that about half the time is spent in attending lectures or lab work and the other in self study. For reasons of economy and efficiency certain kinds of courses are given to a group or small class; for example chemistry, physics, biology and languages, where demonstration in some form or other is necessary.

### **The tutorial group**

As a social unit of the Workshop, it contains all the elements of Kees’ original family school. Here are children of different ages, sex and religions, probably studying different courses. They decide matters by the sociocratic method. They select a group leader and a secretary. The latter takes over if the group leader is absent. Chosen for three months, the leaders are accordingly placed on a rotation system. Subsequently, the group is never without a leader. With other tutorial groups in the same colour they select three representatives, who go every Monday morning to the school parliament, which incidentally may be called at any time. In this parliament, matters are again decided in the sociocratic way i.e., talk-over until a general agreement is arrived at.

The co-worker in charge of his tutorial group - thus acting as tutor - stands in loco parentis to the members of his tutorial group. Parents come to him for advice in regard to the progress of their child. He reports to the staff meeting on each child and on any difficulty that may arise. This report is made twice yearly. He organizes study project trips with an educational value and he may invite his group to his house for Christmas dinner or so.

Between the infant, junior and senior school his position alters with the greater independence and different requirements of his tutorial group, where the group leader takes over many duties of the tutor. But in all he takes equal part in the discussions and debates and in matters of decisions and so his influence is always important. In the senior school the group leader takes sole control over free work periods and consequently the co-worker is more available in helping students in their self-study.

It may be mentioned here, that all co-workers - handicraft, domestic science, gardening, chemistry, biology, history and languages etc - are completely equal at the staff meetings and are not subject to an intellectual hierarchy as they would be in outside institutions. As tutors (and leaders) they all share in the general welfare of the children of the school, and these qualities do not depend on their knowledge in the specialities which they teach.

### **Curriculum and technique**

A comprehensive study of what and how the workshop teaches to children would be outside the scope of both this article and the writer. K.C. Labert-Anema, the present principal of the school is reported to have written a book on the “Werkplaats” teaching methods in the Infant and Junior schools.

At first Kees’ family school followed children’s interest and play in order

to devise teaching methods. From this developed a teaching program that now precedes these interests; that is to say the children's interests are aroused by exposing them over as wide a field as possible at the early stages of education by way of play-work-study method. These fields cover many so called "non-intellectual subject" after which a child gradually specializes in those fields in which he is most talented. Children may have an extensive knowledge in a small area or little knowledge about a great variety of areas. The educational process starts from the child, it is child-oriented and not teacher-oriented.

Thus basically the "Workshop" offers an education for every shade of personality and in any department of knowledge, regardless of outside requirements of what is supposed to be an education. This is made possible by its emphasis on self-study. Nevertheless this ideal, although adhered to, is naturally modified by various influences.

The first is the policy of the staff itself. They believe that Dutch education is far too "intellectual" and removed from life. Thus as a result of this policy certain subjects, orthodox as well as peculiarly "Workshop", are compulsory. At the early stage of education there is a broad scope which enables the child to get acquainted with various fields after which the child's real interests are allowed to flourish and develop.

The second influence modifying the ideal of unrestricted individual development is exercised by the demands of outside institutions, for example students continuing their studies to higher education must satisfy the requirements of the Ministry of Education, universities and other schools. As to admission to universities (i.e., compulsory subjects) new courses are always designed. These courses when successfully completed provide entrance to other educational institutions.

The individualization of courses accounts for the great diversity of subjects studied, from photography to mathematics, from domestic science, farming and agriculture to logic, music and drama. The only limits are those constrained by the economics of the course. Give them a plane and an airfield and there will be a course in aviation! This diversity also explains the interests private companies, such as Phillips and K.L.M. (Dutch Airlines), have in the activities of the school. It has for instance a course in management and leadership.

In each department co-workers are free to experiment with new teaching methods. At staff meetings the findings of new techniques and their results are discussed so that all know what the other is doing. Furthermore, teaching experiments are carried out in conjunction with overseas progressive educationists.

An example is the experiment conducted at the Workshop on Harold Palmer's new technique of learning to speak and think in English for one year, after which they are then introduced to its grammar. The thesis is that learning English, a synthetic mental process, is slowed down by the use of grammar, an analytical mental process and that the intricacies of grammar make little sense without the knowledge of the language. Another instance is the experiment to assimilate partially blinded children who otherwise are sent to other institutions.

Co-workers go overseas to keep up to date with the latest methods and overseas educationists visit the Werkplaats to do like-wise.

It is significant that the province of Utrecht has made two years study at the Workshop” teaching college compulsory for its own teachers and so far they love every minute of it.

All these courses lead to the school’s diploma the I.V.O, which is a statement of subjects studied and sub-sections attained. This is issued without final examination as it is known in orthodox schools. Thus although all children have the same diploma, they will show to have studied different subjects.

The I.V.O. or In Individual Advanced Education Diploma came into existence after an agreement reached with two other Dutch progressive schools. It aimed at synchronising the standards reached in the subjects, especially those laid down by orthodox schools. The first I.V.O. was equivalent to the Intermediate Certificate, so that pupils from the Workshop could proceed to orthodox schools to study for their matriculation. This diploma was accepted by both states and schools without final examination.

But when the progressive schools were preparing the Second I.V.O. (Matriculation Standard) the Ministry of Education intervened and suddenly imposed a final State Examination, which the school had no option but to accept.. This action was against the explicit condition, it appears, agreed upon in 1946, when the school accepted a grant. (See W. Rawson (1956), The Werkplaats Adventure).

Now let us see how the progress of each child may be followed.

Each child has a “Werkplaats-oversicht-boek” or work-position-book. Each page represents a subject of study, which in theory is optional and therefore not printed. If the subject was English, the page would look something like the following:

<b>English</b>	<b>Sec 1</b>	<b>Sec 2</b>	<b>Sec 3</b>	<b>Sec 4</b>	<b>Sec 5</b>
Grammar					
Pronunciation					
Vocabulary					
Composition					
Literature					
Conversation					
Customs					
Translation					
<b>Books read:</b>					

Each subdivision is again divided into sections representing a course are work-folder. These sections are not unlike the lesson-sheets issued here in Australia by the Correspondence School at Black Friars. Before each child may proceed to the next section or work-folder he must pass a test oral or written for which he may sit every Friday afternoon.

At these tests the work-folders are discussed and on the basis of these, questions may be asked to satisfy the co-worker that the child has understood

the contents of the work contained in the folder.

If the child fails to satisfy the co-worker on a particular part in the work-folder, he is asked to work on that part again, or the co-worker may prepare some additional work to be done before he passes the child. Thus failures at tests do not mean doing the whole course again. Accordingly, there is little time wasted and to “repeat a year” is impossible. When the child passes the test the pupils colours the upper oblong space within a section - as shown in the first two lines above - and the co-worker initials it. No marks are given as the pupil must pass 100%.

Thus at a glance, anybody can see from a page on the work-position-book how far a student has progressed and in exactly what subdivision of a course he excels or is behind.

The system avoids the confusion of marking exams as in orthodox schools. For example, a mark of six is an average and does not tell us whether a child is bad at grammar, conversation or whether he should read more books. These are different aspects of English linguistic ability.

Furthermore this work-position-book gives a clear picture to anybody having actual knowledge of the course, which is important to the tutor of the child’s tutorial group. He can pinpoint a child’s weakness, for he knows where a child ought to be with his studies. From this work-position-book the tutor can give an accurate report to the staff meeting and to parents who come to him for advice any time of the year.

Thus when the child is discussed at the staff meeting there are two teachers involved, the co-worker teaching the subject and the tutor supervising the child in his tutorial group as a member of an intimate family unit. The scholastic and the emotional background are then under review by the two co-workers and the staff is in a better position to help the child.

Adding to this the fact that more than one subject is in the work-position-book, more than two co-workers will probably discuss the child and some concerted action might be take to help him.

This method of recording a child’s progress eliminates the adverse effects of competition, whereas at the same time it stimulates the child in his own progress. It avoids the placing of the child in any order of either inferiority or superiority, because in his tutorial group there are children of different ages, each probably following a different course. Each child feels he is a specialist in his own field, even though he may be studying a course with another child.

### **Pavilions**

As an addendum it must be mentioned that pupils coming from all over Holland are housed in hostels. These are called Pavilions.

There are Language pavilions, Science Pavilions, Drama Pavilions, Music Pavilions etc etc. For example if you live in a French Pavilion, run by a French couple, perhaps with their own children at the Werkplaats, you are expected to speak French the moment you enter the door.

These Pavilions specially cater for “Workshop” students and are usually privately run. They have libraries and a study room and here again a group leader maintains order.

Some co-workers run their own Pavilions.

### **Critique of orthodox schools**

This system is quite unlike the system at orthodox schools and we cannot pass without mentioning some objections to these.

The standardized subjects taught to year classes can of necessity only benefit the average of the class. It goes too slow for the brighter children and too fast for the duller ones; and the number of children so suffering grows in proportion to the number of children in the class.

Moreover year classes and year examinations tend to motivate the child only once or twice a year and that is when an examination is pending. This motivation is channelled only into relearning quickly what should have been learned systematically throughout the year. Apparently no account is taken of the celebrated “plateaux of learning” processes. Each child is supposed to reach this “plateau” at the same time.

Perhaps the worst feature of the final examination system is that if one fails at a yearly exam, one whole year has been wasted. Educational resources are squandered. Even if the student’s knowledge would represent two months work, it is two valuable months lost. Then to expect a student to summarise in two hours what it took him a whole year to study is surely overestimating the capacity of the memory content of the human mind. With all the reference works available now-a-days this aspect of knowledge is the least important.

It encourages, even forces, a student to fall back on examination techniques, which can be learned from paper-back copies. This eventually leads to a sort of card game between the student and the examiner, each working out questions of chance. If studying for exams were not a waste of time, it is sure to blunt one’s curiosity - his mainspring of knowledge.

One of the worst features of yearly examinations are that they do not take into account the personality aspects of students. Those students with “steel nerves” do best at exams, those sensitive and conscientious pupils eager to get on in life despite personal social handicaps may have exam frights, freeze at the examination table and fail miserably, despite their superior knowledge they may possess. The enormous pressure from the child’s family or from society to “succeed” have resulted in many “drop-outs” or even suicide around the world.

The activities of the “Workshop” are so many that it would be impossible to cramp them into an article of this nature. But let us pick out a few examples.

#### **Siesta**

Perhaps the “siesta” (rest-period) developed from the need of smaller children to have a rest in the afternoon. Sometimes it is difficult for the little ones to stay willingly in their beds. Deck chairs were introduced instead. These were put outside in the sun and while the older ones were playing games in the nearby forest Kees would play music on the gramophone after having told some anecdote on the life of the composer of the music. But soon the older ones would return exhausted from the forest and they quietly joined the younger ones in listening to the music. It was not long before the whole school joined in the “siesta” after lunch and Kees used this opportunity to play classical music with a

short introduction on the life and work of the composer. The children were then told to relax and listen to the various passages and enjoy the music. Often they would fall asleep in the shade among pine trees. I remember the siestas with a tinge of nostalgia and may still enjoy my siestas today.

### **Drama**

Children trained to “speak up” from early age become natural actors. Miming, acting, singing and dancing were all very popular programmes. Once or twice a year a big theatrical, performance would be rehearsed. It was performed either at the school or at another school to which the children were invited. On these exciting occasions the “Workshop” children’s community would go in buses to the host-school, which had arranged accommodation in the homes of other pupils.

Not only were co-workers ex-professional artists (Kees was a conductor and concert violinist) but many children came from artistic families. The parents would come in their spare time to give their young actors a professional touch. The less important plays were scripted and produced by the children themselves.

Nearly every department of the school participated in these performances. The painters, printers, musicians, carpenters, costume-makers were all organised and directed from a specially appointed committee.

These groups activity were closely associated with a project study; e.g. one group would translate Shakespeare, another study the history connected with the play and still another would research social habits of the time. All findings would be coordinated in a general “talk-over” of the school.

### **The Monday morning meeting**

The Monday morning was a busy one for the school. Parliament met and the other children would meet in the great hall to be entertained by their fellow students. Kees might be rehearsing with the school choir and orchestra. A musician might play the piano as part of his/her course in music, or someone would give a lecture for his public speaking course. A group might give a sketch or a little ballet. A visitor might give a talk on foreign politics. If the material ran out, the children would be folk-dancing or sing. With the growth of the school, modern dancing lessons for older boys and girls were introduced, however folk dancing remained very popular at the time I was at the school. This popular session would ensure that children were at the school in the early hours of Monday, because nobody wanted to miss out!

### **The Cleaning Squad**

Formerly cleaning of the old “Workshop” was in the hands of Bette - Kees’ wife. She quickly utilised the children’s eagerness to do little chore for her. She had a charming way of showing the best ways of cleaning and soon the cleaning was done by volunteers. Now there is a permanent cleaning squad under the direction of the Cleaning Squad Senior Group leaders (elected every three months). Each tutorial group sends out a boy or girl in rotation for the cleaning squad and so the children kept their own school clean. Furthermore, it is part of every group leader’s duty to see that each member of his group has tidied up before leaving school. All workers as well as co-workers do their share

in keeping their building spotless. The Dutch have a reputation for cleanliness.

In addition, at the close of Saturday morning - another social affair - all present in the great hall would fan out and join in a general cleaning up of the building.

### **Sex teaching**

Sex is no lesser problem at a progressive school than at any other school. It is needless to say that the “Workshop” is co-educational as are most other schools in Holland. The friendly relationship between workers and co-workers, the tutorial groups and a few specially designed courses help children to understand their sexuality and overcome their problems. The biology course, which is for this reason ‘compulsory’ is carefully designed to prepare children for sex-teaching later on. Young pupils are introduced at an early stage to the phenomenon of reproduction of life in plants and lower animals. When the time is ripe the transition to human reproduction is smooth and easily grasped. The progress of the course is in harmony with the development of the child and being given to small groups it follows the child’s ever growing curiosity. By the time questions are asked the child is already equipped with the terms and necessary knowledge of sexual life to understand reproduction of the higher animals.

Human reproduction is part and parcel of this great wonder of nature - the continuation of living things. Without diminishing the importance of human sexual behaviour, it is portrayed as only one aspect of this.

The physical side is explained earlier than the emotional side, which is tackled in the family atmosphere of the tutorial group as the occasion arises. The topic might crop up during the discussions and debates in tutorial groups and the tutor will see to it that the question is brought to light in full. Both boys and girls are taught together. They themselves discuss the ethical code of sex under the guidance of the co-worker. He is not there to judge but to show the children the various consequences that follow and to relate their individual difficulties to others. This tend to make them realise the transitional nature of their adolescence. Those familiar with group psycho-therapy would recognise the similarities of techniques.

This technique of submerging emotional turmoils related to love and sex is followed by another course, called “child care”. It is in effect a kind of preparation for marriage, or marriage counselling, originally designed for girls. It discusses courtship, problems of jealousy, engagement, wedding, pregnancy, prenatal care and the growth of the child, birth and care of baby.

The effect is that there is a healthy frankness about sex and it is no wonder that the “Workshop” children confide to the co-workers whenever they have any particular need. There is nothing to be ashamed of... and they understand. Questions such as whether a couple should live together before marriage or how to avoid divorces would not be uncommon, requiring special skills as co-workers to handle. Attitudes would be discussed in the context of philosophy or religious teachings, for after all many workers and co-workers came from different religious background. Kees Boeke was a quaker. (I remember a Jewish co-worker, who had escaped from Germany during Hitler’s rise to power just before the war. He was an excellent teacher of chemistry and

he turned his lab into a great attraction to workers.)

This may perhaps prove that sex is rather an adult's problem and that children are far less complicated.

The Workshop approach of honesty and frankness, without recourse to strict morality or condemnation, may not have the final answer, but at the time it was far ahead in creating a world in which children too may express themselves, where deeper emotions find an outlet and where they don't feel alone during the storms of adolescence.

Here then we have a community where there are few secrets and paradoxes; it is free to be itself without embarrassment. It was normal the children would swim in the nude when they were near a river or at a beach near the sea.

### **Art room**

Whether you are a worker or co-worker, there are always moments you want to be left alone. Something is eating you, sometimes you don't know what. Then go to the art room, grab a canvas and some brushes or paper and charcoal and away you go. After you have lost yourself in your work of art, you suddenly feel that things are not so bad after all. The art room is therefore the refuge of absolute freedom. Except for those who want to take up commercial art or professional painting, no special course is given. But there is always a co-worker, eager to help you when you want him and he always encourages you in your work of creation. Children come and go at any time of the day and may use anything that is in the room. Sometimes the co-worker takes a group of children into the forest or near a little bridge. They set up their easels and make a picture. This department is used rather for therapeutic purposes than for teaching, although more formal courses may be taken. I believe that many Dutch artists may have come from the Werkplaats.

### **Parents and school**

It has already been mentioned that parents are encouraged to participate in the education of their children. Not only actors and musicians parents, but any parent is welcome to contribute some of their trade knowledge and practices for the benefit of the whole school. For example when the school decided to start a school newsletter for children, a group of parents connected to the printing industry helped to remodel an old printing press machine and taught the children how to print and prepare a paper. Thus the principles and practice of the printing industry as introduced to the Workshop. In addition, twice a year one Saturday was set aside for Parents Day.

The Domestic Science department, entirely organized by students would prepare a dinner to be held in the great hall, exclusively for parents and co-workers. They would be catered for by a group of workers. These occasions enabled parents and teachers to meet at a social level and discuss the progress of the children. Co-workers would explain the activities of the school. Sometimes talks would be given. Not only would the parents become familiar with the philosophy and activities of the school, but friends of parents were introduced to the school and this resulted usually in more enrollments of pupils.

Prior to the commencement of dinner each parent would meet the tutor

of the child in private, so that the parent could discuss the progress of the child or any other matter concerning the child; i.e., home or financial difficulties if any. Here it would be appropriate to mention that school fees were determined on a sliding scale, according to income which remained confidential between parent and school.

Some parents thus received an entirely free education, but whenever possible parents paid in kind. This practice dates from Kees' early family school when some parents were not able to pay full fees. In these cases bakers would supply flour for the Domestic Science Department, farmers fertilizers and carpenters wood. Thus whenever possible parents would help provide the materials for educational purposes.

### **The building of the school**

The characteristic relation between the school and parents may be traced directly to the infant stage of the Werkplaats.

Inspired by Kees Boeke's incredible courage and integrity and with the full support of his wife Bette, their little circle of friends got together and quietly started to build their school. This group consisted of men and women of all walks of life: artists, architects, solicitors, bricklayers and builders and other tradesmen.

When the little school had only about thirty children an anonymous financier donated money to build a big school, now called the "Old Workshop". They had just enough to buy the materials and land. The friends got together and started building the school on their weekends, holidays and any other free time.

At long last on the 12 July 1929, the last stroke of paint brush was applied to the turret of the school by one of the pupils. He forgot a list of names that was still lying in the steeple. Because of the paint he could not reach it.

When workers came down they celebrated the completion of the school by throwing water at each other as a prelude to the final wash-up.

This event is still celebrated every year now and the children come to school all prepared for the water splashing. This follows after the president of the parliament climbs into the turret and has read out the names of the persons who were building the school in those difficult years.

The building was undertaken on an entirely cooperative basis. Teachers had an equal share of the money that was left over after necessary expenditure. As this was not sufficient, the school began their own farm, the proceeds of which helped to keep teachers supplied with basic necessities.

The success of this project was due no doubt again to the sociocratic method which derived from Kees' Quaker practice. Friends decided matters on condition that all agreed. To many this may sound strange, but it must be remembered that taking votes tends to split the group into camps. Furthermore, although sometimes the sociocratic method may be laborious, the members gained by an intimate knowledge of each other.

Also, this group consisted of mature and educated men and women old enough to have experienced the First World War at their most impressionable period of life and despite their age they had lost none of their hope for the creation of a new kind of world. This was the mainspring of this unbelievable

and daring undertaking.

Today (1961) the school's financial structure may perhaps be more stable; it is a school with prestige attached to it.

Ever since the Royal Dutch family sent their three daughters to the "Workshop" to mingle with ordinary children of all classes, the school has received much favourable publicity.

### **Summer camps**

In a school where there is little difference between play and work, it is no surprise to have school summer camps. When the school was still small, all the children would go to the village, a farm or to an island where they would play and turn their hands to cooking over a log fire, or to milking a cow or even gathering eggs. They would go for long walks and swim in a creek.

At night they would return to their camp and rehearse a new play or the school orchestra would practise for a new symphony.

These camping holidays were usually linked to a group project-study. Different groups would set out to study different aspects of the area, geology, archaeology, botany, zoology, social habits of the people, industry and so on. When they came back to school, they would exhibit their findings in the great hall. Another feature was to live in a castle and reenact the history for the benefits of tourists.

One such camping trip caused a commotion when it claimed to have found peat on an island. Subsequently geologists proved this to be correct. There was a field underneath the beach extending to the sea-bed.

### **Leadership**

In a democratic community such as the Workshop there is ample opportunity to acquire the qualities of leadership. There are the various councils, committees and tutorial groups where leadership is fostered simply by experience.

Apart from this there is a specially designed course for leadership that aims at bringing about cooperation without coercion. Situations are created whereby a child assumed the role of a leader over a group that are instructed to be uncooperative. Dissensions and objections are discussed and ways and means of overcoming them are suggested by the other pupils. Various actual life situations such as would be experienced in a large company are replicated, which provides debating opportunities for the course. It has been reported that prior to the establishment of the course "Workshop" children made very good leaders in later life. Hence the business world's interest in the school.

### **Religion**

In Holland religion is a touchy subject as is the case in many other parts of the world. Schools are equally divided among Catholics, Protestants and state schools (in which no religion is taught).

The classification and isolation of children tends to aggravate rather than minimize intolerance and misunderstanding between religious denominations - the "us" and "them". The repercussions are seen in Holland's political life where parties tend to split along religious lines.

Although the Werkplaats is officially undenominational it aims at bringing together the various groups. It encourages students to observe the rites of the various religions at social occasions. At the beginning of communal lunch a moments of silence allows students to say their prayers if they wish.

Consequently children learn to respect the innermost convictions of others by familiarisation. Co-workers and workers may be of any religion and act according to their own conscience, provided that compulsion is not used. The absence of coercion in the community permits this kind of personal freedom.

Those who are atheists, agnostics, Jewish or otherwise non-Christian have many opportunities to acquaint themselves with the bible. For example during the rehearsal of *The Passion According to St. John*, Kees would explain the meaning of a musical passage with reference to the bible.

But no periods are set aside for the teaching of religion. The teaching of tolerance in the Workshop is so successful that the school encountered no mishaps during the German occupation, when Jewish, Communist and some children from parents sympathetic to Germany were attending the school together.

Nor do I remember a sociocratic conference to have degenerated into personal abuse. The loyalty to the group outweighed any outside influences further examples of which are mentioned in Wyatt Rawson's book "The Werkplaats Adventure".

This outline of the structure and activities of the Workshop children's community as experienced by me can hardly be concluded without some thoughts on the subject of education.

John Dewey once wrote: "The course of traditional education is its aristocratic character, its isolation from life. The crux of progressive education is its universality and closeness to life."

This epitomises not only the difference between the two systems but also points to the conflict in educational thought. It begs the question what purpose education ought to serve. On this subject there are so many contenders as there are philosophers.

This question is further shrouded by the fact that our ways of thinking are very much influenced by our ways of education. It would appear that this becomes rather a conversation between educational institutions than between intelligent people.

The tragedy is that the question of "purpose" is closely related to the "use of schools". The Nazi regime painfully demonstrated how successfully they used the schools for the purposes of turning young harmless children into the most fanatic, ruthless and brutal soldiers ever produced.

Probably today such a scheme of indoctrination is being repeated in countries on a much vaster scale. Comparisons of populations of Germany (60 million) and for instance China (800 million) would afford an indication of the impact on the course of modern history - and of the plight of democracy.

The last World War and the threat of the next one are sufficient reason to maintain that the issue of purpose is not a mere matter of sophistry and semantics.

It may be said that all schools pursue a purpose but the main difference

between progressive and orthodox schools is that the former consider purpose a matter of individual choice and not a collective one. The purpose of life may be less important than the enjoyment of it. The reverse seems to be true of orthodox schools, where examinations are more important than study.

But a collective purpose necessarily implies compulsion. To keep children, as well as teachers, under compulsion could hardly be justified without some purpose imposed from above. This suggests that the problem of “purpose” is peculiar to authoritarian schools.

The regimentation of times, curriculum and even clothes is the logical outcome of the authoritarian nature. The unforgivable paradox is that to teach children uncritical obedience to, and unquestioning acceptance of authority is inconsistent with democracy. From limited democracy to limited dictatorship is but a little step.

The growth of authoritarian schools in most democratic countries may be due rather to history than to educational thought.

The pedigree of progressive schools, as known today, may be traced to Rousseau’s *Emile*. From the French Revolution its banner spread to Italy where Pestalozzi laid the foundation of Froebel’s schools in Germany. This process of establishing liberal schools was rudely interrupted by the revolutions of the 19th century. After the 1848 revolution the Prussian authorities closed the Froebel schools as being inconsistent with the aims of the dictatorship into which this young country had slipped. (See Chamber’s Encyclopaedia 1959, Vol 6, 90B). At the turn of the century, Maria Montessori picked up the banner where Froebel had left it, but naturally she was too late because the modern orthodox schools were by now firmly established.

Were it not for the 1848 revolution that convulsed nearly all Europe, the authoritarian schools in a democratic society would indeed have been a strange phenomenon. It is believed that Otto von Bismarck as prime minister of the Prussian state in the 1870’s instituted the concept of examinations into education as a means of improving the low standards by the teachers. In fact, examinations could easily be used to cover up the incompetence of teachers.

Parents are not historians and therefore there is a popular explanation for the necessity of authoritarian schools. And this is that the use of force in orthodox schools is justified by the belief that 1) children are irresponsible and 2) children cannot reason.

Apart from the fact that this is hardly an excuse to punish children for acts for which they are irresponsible, the “Workshop” experiment is living proof that this concept is false. Responsibility is one of degree, situations, mental and developmental age. It may be true that in the early years of a child’s life, guidance and directions are appropriate. The child’s viewpoint is still ego-centric. But as it grows the child will soon become aware of other ego-centric human beings. Soon it starts to recognize that others have needs and that it is possible to negotiate a compromise that satisfies his and other’s needs as well. Provided children are trained to explain their behaviour to the group - and this is taken to be the basis of responsibility - it is shown beyond doubt that they are sensitive to responsibility at a remarkably early age.

As to the faculty of reason, the exasperated parent can testify to their children’s ingenuity for presenting excuses - using reason as a ploy. The

difference between a fib and a lie is one of intelligence; the latter is so logical that it is readily accepted. The reasonableness of adult society would be dwarfed by that of the Workshop's children's community. The aristocratic character of orthodox schools also entails the subordination of teachers.

It has been shown that as a group, the teaching profession ranks second highest in intelligence [CT Morgan (1956), *Introduction to Psychology*, P 403]. yet of all the professions the teachers are the most restricted in using their personal judgment in their skill.

The moment a surgeon is told how to operate, he ceases to be a professional man. Similarly to subject a teacher to regulations of how to teach is simply to rob him of his profession. This is tantamount to reducing him to an administrator of an educational program. The teacher's benefits of years of study remain therefore idle in orthodox schools.

Yet to point the bone to educational institutions or to educational authorities is just one step short from realising that the parents themselves bear the responsibility for this deplorable state of affairs.

But most parents were pupils from orthodox schools - producing orthodox parents. Thus we have completed one of those vicious circles - self-fulfilling prophecies - against which Kees Boeke and his wife rebelled.

If this is the correct statement of the problem, then the solution would suggest itself.

Children are by nature students of life and therefore the school should be its natural environment. Such an environment has now been created by such men like Kees Boeke.

The "Workshop" was not built exclusively for a few Dutch children, but should be available to all children.

The Werkplaats reflects a new plan for education for young and old. In a world contemplating atomic self-destruction it may well be the only means with which parents want to equip their children to live in peace with their fellow creatures. Australian children also have a right to grow up in a world of their own making. This may be a message of Kees Boeke, a man who never lost faith in the humanity of mankind.