AIEJI: Creating a Profession to Work with Troubled Children and Youth

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ABSTRACT: The evolution of the International Association of Workers for Troubled Children and Youth, founded in 1951, is outlined in terms of the evolving goals, themes, and activities of the organization. AIEJI has developed alongside the profession of “educateur” in Europe, and it continues to promote international awareness and understanding of the needs of young people in more than 20 countries.

One cannot write about the creation and development of the association known as AIEJI, Association Internationale Des Educateurs De Jeunes Inadaptes (International Association of Workers for Troubled Children and Youth) without first mentioning the origin and development of the profession called “educateurs.” Educateur, a French word, is the title of a professional person who specializes in the total life education of troubled young people.

The word “educateur” is a Latin derivative from the word “ex-ducare.” Ex-ducare means to lead out, to pull out, or to encourage the potential in people. Educateurs are thought of as total life specialists engaged in work with children. In the United States, the word “educateur” is often mistaken for the word “educator.” Educator is synonymous with putting information in, and educateur is synonymous with pulling information from people or bringing out their potential.

The educateur profession, initiated in France in 1942, had its greatest evolution after the second world war as several European countries faced the reconstruction of their society including the problems of dealing with thousands of children whose parents were either killed, prisoners of war, or temporarily missing during the general
chaos of the time. As traditional treatment patterns were abandoned and the new child care services were designed to meet the needs of troubled children, a new profession dedicated to a holistic approach in trying to meet the physical, mental, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of children emerged—that of the educateur.

Since these early developments, training institutes for the educateur have been initiated throughout Europe. Immediately after World War II, there were approximately 50 such institutes. Today there are over 50 in France alone. The educateur throughout Europe has many different titles; however, the actual practice and training is very similar. In Norway, for instance, the title for an educateur is “barnevernpedagog.” In Russia, they are known as “defectologists.” In Belgium their title is “educateur sociale,” and in Sweden and Denmark it is “socio-pedagogue.” In France the title is “Educateur Specialise.”

Creation of AIEJI

In the late 1940s the Cultural Division of the French High Commissioner’s Office in Germany assigned to H. Van Etten and H. Joubrel the responsibility to organize an international meeting on “problems in the education of troubled children and youth.” The purpose of the meeting, held in April 1949, was to promote in the aftermath of the war better understanding between the French and the Germans working with troubled youth. While originally the scope of the discussion involved only the German and French individuals, several representatives from other countries were later invited.

A second meeting took place in 1950 in Bad Durckheim, with a third following a year later in Freiburg-im-Breisgau. In each of these previous meetings the French Association of Educateurs brought enthusiasm to the discussions which in turn motivated participants from other countries to found similar organizations in their own countries in support of the educateur philosophy as evidenced in France.

By the time that the fourth conference was held in Germany on March 19, 1951, it was becoming clear that such international meetings were helpful in addressing the needs of young people. For this reason, in the mountains near Freiburg-im-Breisgau at Schluchsee, the participants organized the International Association of Workers for Troubled Children and Youth (AIEJI) and elected a Dutchman, M.D.Q.R. Mulock Houwer, who was then the director of the “Zandbergen” Schools in Amersfoort, to become president. The infant association then had its headquarters in the Netherlands.