

Research Center for Neuro -
Psycho - Pedagogical Sciences

CENTRO
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Janusz
Korczak

The Freinet Schools of Liège

An innovative pedagogical experience



Curated by:

Enrico Bottero
Stefano Cobello
Federica Gaetano
Daniela Melotti
Rudy Migliore
Lara Polsoni
Gabriele Recchia
Sonia Sorgato
Silvana Testa
Agnese Tombesi

Preface by:

Stefano Cobello

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Books series

Research Center for Neuro-Psycho-Pedagogical Sciences Janusz Korczak

Polo Europeo della Conoscenza - I.C. Bosco Chiesanuova

The Freinet Schools of Liège

An innovative pedagogical experience

Liegi, March 25-28 2024

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www.europole.org

Publisher:
Multimage - Associazione Editoriale
Via Desiderio da Settignano, 11
50135 Firenze
www.multimage.org
info@multimage.org

Graphic design:
Marco Macchioni

Print:
PressUP
Printed in May 2025

ISBN: 9791281546721

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Preface

Dear teachers, school leaders, and parents, this book is published within the framework of research actions funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Program under the "Let's Care" Project No. 101059425, which aims to combat school dropout (www.letscaireproject.eu) by the Janusz Korczak Research Center of the permanent school network Polo Europeo della Conoscenza - I.C. Bosco Chiesanuova (www.europole.org). Janusz Korczak was a great Polish pedagogue killed in the Treblinka extermination camp with his two hundred Jewish children at the hands of the Nazi regime who throughout his life placed "The Child's Right to Respect" at the center of his pedagogical research.

The Freinet Schools of Liège is a book born as a synthesis of the research and observations carried out by the group of teachers, researchers, psychologists, and pedagogues who participated in the visit to the Freinet schools in Liège in March 2024. As coordinator of the Polo Europeo della Conoscenza network, I would like to begin this presentation by thanking Enrico Bottero, whose research team on Freinet pedagogy (www.freinet.it) is now a point of reference for many Italian teachers, and the two French trainers who guided us in this study and observation path in Belgium: Marcel and Danielle Thorel. Their support, supervision, and timely analytical interventions led us to discover Freinet pedagogy practiced in its natural place: the classroom. Special thanks also go to Anita Ruiz, Coordinator of the "Célestin Freinet" municipal schools in Liège (Belgium) and Member of the CCRF (Centre Coopératif de Recherche et de Formation à la pédagogie Freinet - Liège), who organized our visit and supported us at every moment, allowing us to observe the classes of three Freinet schools for a week.

It is not easy to describe such a dense and constructive experience, made possible by the European Commission's Erasmus+ adult mobility program and through the National Agency in Florence (INDIRE). Eight teachers from different schools across Italy participated in the visit. Their contribution made this publication possible, which I hope will help and guide you in understanding Freinet pedagogy.

Some might wonder: why look to the pedagogical research of Célestin Freinet from a century ago as a valid and innovative pedagogical model for today's school? The an-

swer is simple: like all the great pedagogues of the last century, Freinet placed the right of children and young people to be respected in their growth factors and identities in a context of expressive freedom at the center. However, to understand how constructive the experience in Liège was, it is good to take a step back and briefly recount who Célestin Freinet was and what he believed in.

Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) was a French teacher and pedagogue known for introducing new teaching techniques in the first half of the 20th century. He was among the first to use typography in school; the children composed and printed their own texts. For this reason, Freinet is considered one of the precursors of modern teaching. His war experience led him to develop a strong sense of pacifism that deeply influenced his pedagogical thought. He advocated for an educational approach based on cooperation, the free expression of children, and learning through direct experience. His pedagogical vision remains very relevant today, having influenced schools and educational projects worldwide.

I would like to share my perspective as an observer, pedagogue, and sociologist on Freinet pedagogy. Freinet pedagogy is an educational philosophy and pedagogical research that focuses on the active and cooperative learning of the child and the young person. This develops through several pedagogical principles, including:

- Learning by doing: Children learn best through practical experience and active exploration.
- Free expression: Children should be free to express themselves in various ways (writing, art, music, etc.).
- Cooperation: Learning is a collaborative process where children work together and learn from each other.
- Natural learning: Learning should be connected to real-life experiences and the child's interests.
- Respect for individual rhythms: Children learn at their own pace. The educational path should be flexible enough to adapt to individual timing.

How is a Freinet classroom organized? There are many pedagogical elements and tools visible in a Freinet class:

- The Free Text: Children write about topics that interest them. These texts are then shared and discussed with the class.
- Printing: Children learn to read and write using a printing press (today using new technologies and/or paper), allowing them to create their own books and newspapers.
- Class Meetings (Cooperative Council): Regular meetings are held to discuss classroom issues, make decisions, and plan activities.
- Correspondence: Children exchange letters and projects with other classes, even in other countries.
- Work Plans: Children create their own work plans, outlining the tasks they want

to complete.

- Self-assessment: Children are encouraged to evaluate their own work and progress. We observed the benefits for children practicing Freinet pedagogy. We found a great motivation for learning, evident when children feel respected and their opinions matter.
- Development of critical thinking skills: Children learn to think critically and solve problems through practical activities, individually or in groups.
- Improvement of social skills: Children develop significant social skills through collaboration and communication, fostering a sense of community and empathy that is impossible to develop in a competitive and elitist pedagogical model.
- Growth in self-esteem: Children gain confidence in their abilities as they take responsibility for their own learning.

During the Liège visit, we also observed how Freinet pedagogy is implemented, remembering it is an evolving pedagogical research based on group and individual dynamics. Among these, the free text holds great value as a principle of freedom of expression. It is the cornerstone of Freinet pedagogy. Children are given the freedom to write on any subject of interest without restrictions on form or content.

For example, children write their texts individually or in groups. Texts are shared with the class, often read aloud, and discussed for feedback. These can be used for class newspapers, letters, or books. This method helps children develop writing skills for a real audience, stimulates creativity, increases motivation, and strengthens self-confidence.

Printing is a method to give children the tools to become "authors." Freinet believed printing was an essential tool for learning. Today, other tools are used, but the principle remains: putting the child at the center by offering the chance to use their energy constructively. Printing makes learning visible, develops literacy, promotes collaboration, and connects to the community much like Don Milani's work with his students.

The Democratic Classroom: It is exciting to see a democratic class with all the rules that characterize democracy. Class meetings (Cooperative Councils) are a living forum where children discuss problems, make decisions, and plan activities. The council meets regularly, usually once a week, led by the children with the teacher as a facilitator. This helps children develop communication skills, voice their opinions, and understand democratic principles.

Opening windows to the world through correspondence: Freinet encouraged children to exchange letters and projects globally, allowing them to learn about different cultures and perspectives while learning foreign languages. This expands horizons, promotes empathy, and makes learning more engaging.

Stefano Cobello
Coordinator of the network Polo Europeo della Conoscenza



1

Introduction

1.1 The Freinet Schools of Liège

This document summarizes an experience from March 2024. From March 25 to 28, a group of Italian teachers visited several Freinet schools in Liège, Belgium. The goal was to learn about the pedagogical experience and document teaching activities through dialogue with teachers, directors, and members of the Centre Coopératif de Recherche en Pédagogie Freinet (CCRF) of Liège.

Why Liège? Because Liège has 10 public Freinet schools. This result was achieved gradually. In 1985, at the request of many families, the local authority established the first Freinet school. Today, ten schools cover about 20% of the city's preschool and primary population, totaling approximately 2,000 students. These schools welcome students from various social classes. Since 1998, Liège has also promoted a secondary school practicing active teaching to ensure continuity.

To ensure continuity, training has been offered to all Freinet school teachers since 2015, often in collaboration with French Freinet movement (ICEM) trainers like Marcel and Danielle Thorel.

“In Belgium, preschools and primary schools are managed by the Municipalities”.

1.2 Notes on the School System in Belgium

Belgium is divided into autonomous communities. In the French-speaking Wal-lonia Community (including Liège), schools are managed by the Community or, for preschool and primary, by provinces and municipalities. Preschool starts at 2.5 years old; primary school lasts six years, starting at age 6.

- School Schedule: Monday to Friday, 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM (Wednesday ends at 12:00 PM).

- Primary Weekly Time: 28 periods of 50 minutes (including foreign languages, PE, philosophy, and religion/ethics).

- Preschool Weekly Time: 26 periods of 50 minutes plus two hours of psycho-motricity.

- External assessments occur in the 3rd, 5th, and 6th years. The 6th-year exam is certificatory for the Certificat d'Études de Base (CEB). Additional resources are provided to schools in lower socioeconomic areas (encadrement différencié); Freinet schools in Liège benefit from this, meaning they are not elite schools but largely serve working-class populations.

Classes are multi-level (two age groups per class). Students change teachers every two years. This allows teachers to specialize in specific age brackets, a system different from the Italian “cycle” model.

1.3 Visit plan (March 25-28 2024)

The group visited schools including Vieille Montagne, Beau Mur, Belleflamme, and Laveu. Activities included observing cooperative dictation, free math research, free texts, and work plans.

The Italian Group included:

Teachers:

Federica Gaetano, Daniela Melotti, Rudy Migliore, Lara Polsoni, Gabriele Recchia, Sonia Sorgato, Silvana Testa, Agnese Tombesi.

Accompanying staff:

Stefano Cobello, Enrico Bottero, Pamela Giorgi.

2

Organization

Spaces

Upon entering a Freinet classroom, the organization is immediately visible through the layout of the space.

Time and activities

Activities are organized by time: monthly, weekly, and daily scans. The Individual Work Plan (PDT) occupies the longest blocks. A timer is present in every class to help children manage transitions. While sometimes the pace seemed tight, this organization helps students become aware of their progress.

Materials

- Chairs: Often have tennis balls on the feet to ensure a silent environment, allowing movement without disturbing others.

- Walls: No pre-packaged posters. All materials (research, texts, drawings) are created by the children a “living” culture.

- Boards: Both traditional whiteboards and Interactive Whiteboards (IWB) are used, though whiteboards are more frequent for collective text correction.

- Teacher's table: No central desk (cathedra). The teacher has a corner table for files and supplies, acting as a meeting point for individual consultations.

- Accessories: Classrooms are rich in materials. Students use folders to document their learning. Computers (4-5 per class) are used for word processing and research. Headphones are available for silent reading. Students can autonomously manage needs like drinking water or using the restroom.

Types of activities

Moments of collective work alternate with individual activities. Collective work involves choral reflection on specific topics. For example, a math question: “How can you divide a circle into 4, 6, or 8 equal parts?” leads to individual research and then a collective comparison of solutions.

Relationships

Relationships aim at cooperation to build personal and collective culture. Teachers are authoritative yet available. Peer relationships are collaborative, focusing on completing tasks within the allotted time.

Teacher's posture

The teacher is oriented toward active participation, often moving or leaning over a workspace with children. Teachers never substitute for the students; if a word is misspelled, the teacher asks the group for an opinion or suggests using a dictionary rather than giving the answer.

3

The Techniques

Entretien (Conversation)

A time for children to talk about personal news or present an object. It stimulates research and public speaking. A “timekeeper” ensures limits (usually 5 minutes). The teacher takes notes and photos for the “Class History Notebook.”

Language

- Free Text: Children write individually; some use stencils or dictate to the teacher. Texts are read aloud, discussed, and sometimes used for literacy reinforcement.

- Cooperative Dictation: The teacher dictates; students leave gaps for unknown words. They then reflect on grammar in groups, using dictionaries and wall posters for reference.

Mathematics research

Starts from children's proposals (e.g., “Chinese multiplication” or building 3D structures with straws). It moves from individual discovery to shared strategies and finally to codifying rules or formulas.

Artistic activities

While production of posters was seen, structured free artistic expression was less frequent. One group presented a rap song.

Conferences and presentations

Essential for alternating individual and collective work. Students prepare posters or digital slides on topics like “Street Art” or “Prehistory,” followed by Q&A and peer-designed quizzes.

Individualized work plan

Students work on individual files (math, French) proposed by the teacher. While it accounts for individual needs, the “free choice” was often limited to the order of tasks within a pre-defined set.

Cooperative council

Classes meet to discuss the minutes of the previous meeting, life in the classroom, and school rules. Discussions are orderly, led by a student president and a “secretary of the word.” It focuses on relational dynamics and organization rather than academic planning (which remains with the teacher).

Duties

Every class has a systematic division of roles: timekeeper, secretary of the word, light monitor, tutors, and material managers.

4**Concluding observations**

The main difference from Italy is the very presence of public Freinet schools, enabled by Liège’s local management. Another difference is the near-total absence of disabled students in regular classes, as they are often directed to special schools, making the pedagogical task less complex than in the Italian inclusive model.

Key highlights

- Organization: Strict adherence to time ensures freedom within constraints, though excessive rigidity can sometimes hinder expression.
- Content: While Freinet preferred “event-based programming,” some classes leaned toward pre-defined content.
- Spaces/Materials: These are non-negotiable foundations for alternative pedagogy.
- Teacher Role: The professional distance (vs. Italian physical affectivity) promotes student autonomy.

Cooperation means organizing work so that each person’s success contributes to everyone’s success. Only adults who practice cooperation can promote it, creating a supportive mini-society against exasperated individualism.

Appendix

Personal reflections

Agnese Tombesi

“Freinet techniques significantly improved my work path. Relationships evolved between me and the children and among the children themselves.”

Lara Polsoni

“In Liège, I observed all students carrying out work with enthusiasm, order, and responsibility. School is an authentic space for self-determination.”

Daniela Melotti

“Activities like entretien and free text are essential for self-construction of knowledge. I reflected on the need to ‘be a cohesive group’ as teachers.”

Rudy Migliore

“It allowed me to see the practical application of strategies known only through books. I immediately experimented with these upon returning.”

Federica Gaetano

“Through the individual work plan, students develop intrinsic motivation. The school does not reproduce social injustices but teaches how to become thinking citizens.”

Sonia Sorgato

“The practices observed have entered my daily teaching. Putting children’s thoughts at the center of planning.”

Silvana Testa

“It motivated me to adjust my aim. I noticed that in Liège they differentiate between the ‘Work Plan’ (skills training) and ‘Free Work’ (creativity).”

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I.C. Bosco Chiesanuova
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Co-funded by
the European Union

Approval code:
2023-1-IT02-KA121-ADU-000147752

The book we present is a summary of the observations made by the group that participated in the visit to the Freinet schools in Liège (March 2024). Some might turn up their noses and ask: why see Célestin Freinet's pedagogical research from a century ago as a valid and innovative pedagogical model for today's schools? The answer is simple: like all the great pedagogists of the last century, Freinet placed at the center the right of children and young people to be respected in their growth factors and identities within a context of freedom of expression.

(From the preface by Stefano Cobello)

€ 12

