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# Experiment in Education

An Account of Danilo Dolci's  
New Education Centre in Sicily

EDWIN H. ALTON

Price: 40p  
600 lire

prices. In the summer of 1974 the workmen were toiling in the intense heat of a Sicilian July. But in spite of all difficulties work went on, and Danilo, ever optimistic, started a search for additional funds.

Money came from Germany, Switzerland, W. Amman, Britain and the U.S.A. There were generous benefactors in a number of these countries to whom Danilo owes a deep debt of gratitude. During the summer of 1974 the Swedish organisation SECO – a group of young people 13-19 years old – began to raise money by a scheme called *A day's work for Charity*, and by October they were able to pledge the huge sum of 150 million lire – about £100,000 – enough to finance the construction of the Community Centre, which is to include a hall seating over 300 people. Other contributors pledged varying sums: for example, the Swiss hoped to send another 20,000 lire. The British Trust sent £8,000, a sum, it was hoped, would build one workroom. Since then, however, costs have well-nigh doubled and this sum will now be insufficient for the work envisaged. Generous British subscribers have sent, and are continuing to send, further donations.

In addition to the access road, the Municipality of Partinico has promised to finance the laying down of a water supply and has guaranteed to maintain a good rate of delivery, no mean thing in this part of the island.

In order to complete the New Education Centre a great deal of money is still required. In these days it is difficult to estimate what the cost might be, but it seems, at the moment, that nothing short of another miracle is required. But then, Danilo believes in miracles; past experience has taught him that they actually happen.

Perhaps we can give our readers no greater motivation to dedicated action than to quote the words spoken by Dr. Leonard Covello of the *American Friends of Danilo Dolci Inc.* as a Prologue to a film on Dolci's work now being prepared in America:

I feel deeply that the battle for a better world will be won or lost in our educational centers. It is a step towards the future in the education, not only of our children but of the total community. This is the goal of the new Education Center at Partinico. Help us realise this dream.

Referring to the work already started in the New Education Centre, Danilo has recently written:

... We feel it necessary to thank most profoundly everyone who has made a contribution, in whatever manner, to realise this objective which, only a little time ago, seemed a mirage.

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AN ACCOUNT OF DANILO DOLCI'S  
NEW EDUCATION CENTRE  
IN SICILY.

EDWIN H. ALTON

It is a fine, sunny Sunday afternoon in mid-April, the year 1971. Danilo and I are standing on the road that crosses the dam wall of the Iato Reservoir. It is our custom to come here each Sunday afternoon to see how the water is collecting in this wide tranquil valley with its dramatic mountain landscape. The water that is bringing new life and hope to both land and people is rising week by week. Danilo's gaze is focussed far off on the furthest ridges of the mountains.

"Danilo," I say, "how do you feel when you look back on work successfully accomplished?"

Danilo withdraws his gaze from infinity and looks into my eyes. "I never look back," he replies. "Now, as always, I am looking into the future."

I knew that he was already dreaming of the New Education Centre.

The Director of the Mormino Foundation, an educational philanthropic agency established as a memorial to the founder of the *Banca di Sicilia*, once said that he saw no hope for Sicily as long as its present educational structure remained.

The educators need to be more educated and the entire school curriculum needs to be drastically revised. . . . We also need many more schools. The law requires all children between the ages of 5 and 14 to attend school, but it is a silly law because in many towns there aren't any schools for the children beyond the fifth grade, and those that do exist are often little more than stables.

Something is fundamentally wrong with education in Sicily. Too many people are still the victims of superstition and evil tradition; and perhaps what is worse, their ignorance prevents them from accepting the concept of group action.

For too long popular education has been resisted as a waste of money, with the argument that poor families prefer their children to stay at home to tend the goats. In the past the local elite showed no interest in popular education and often refused to build schools despite the law for compulsory education. Moreover, the staffs in schools already in existence sometimes went unpaid because the powers that be could use public money more profitably.

A commission set up in 1866 announced that union with Italy had brought some genuine improvements to the island, but very little had been done for farm labourers and share croppers, who constituted the bulk of the

population. Freedom of speech and of the press could mean little to such people. Because they were illiterate they had no vote and hence no one sought their favour. As a consequence, schools that would have equipped them for voting were never built and some villages long continued without school or doctor.

By the year 1900 Sicily had become one of the chief emigration regions of the world and has continued so. One and a half million Sicilians found it necessary to leave the country in order to seek a livelihood overseas. This huge exodus was a terrible exposure of Sicilian poverty, and yet, strange as it may seem, it had some stimulus on literacy. Reports of good livings to be made overseas were a stimulus to education and literacy, and those left at home often became imbued with the desire to read and write in order to be able to communicate with their relatives abroad.

Yet, in 1911 it was estimated that 58% of the population of Sicily was illiterate. The three Sicilian universities – at Palermo, Catania and Messina – were for a long time geared to the production of lawyers and bureaucrats and had a strong prejudice against such practical studies as agriculture and engineering for which there was such a great need.

Under fascism, schools were built faster than before and a good deal was done for agricultural education, but nothing prevented Sicilian children from massive evasion of school attendance. The 1931 census revealed that, after seventy years of “compulsory” education, 40% of Sicilians were still illiterate.

New schools have been built in Sicily since fascist times and some progress has been made, but there are still places where educational progress has been slight and where methods have failed to move with the times.

Leonardo Sciascia, one of Sicily's finest living writers and himself a schoolmaster, wrote of children in his own school:

Thirty boys bored stiff. They split razor blades down the middle, work them a quarter of an inch into the wooden desks and pluck them like guitar strings. They exchange obscenities that by now I have to ignore—your sister, your mother. They swear, spit, make rabbits out of notebook paper—rabbits that move their long ears and end up as balls of paper if I suddenly call on them. And boats, and paper hats; or they colour in the pictures in the textbooks, using red and the yellow so savagely that they tear the paper. They're bored, poor things. Stories, grammar, the cities of the world, the products of Sicily—but what they're thinking about is lunch. As soon as the bell rings they race out to grab their tin bowls; watery beans with a bit of margarine floating on top, a sliver of canned corned beef and a dab of jam that they wrap up in a sheet of notebook paper and go off licking, jam and ink together.

Other writers have added their voices. The Director of an Italian centre for education study and research has said that the school system is in such a state of decomposition that the day may come when parents will refuse to send their children to schools where they are conditioned,

deformed and frustrated. About twenty-five miles west of Palermo is the town of Partinico with a population of 30,000, which has been Dolci's home and main working centre since 1955. The writer Guido Ballo has asserted that the town lacks 1,000 school places and that for this and other reasons only about half the children of Partinico attend school with any sort of regularity.

Dolci wishes to change all this, but he and his collaborators have more ambitious aims – nothing less than to change the social structure. His demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins and fasts have all been designed for this end. In a sense all his efforts have been educational – to educate the Sicilians in the principles of democratic practice. But when he set up his *Centro Studi e Iniziative* he knew that what he was doing in Sicily had wider implications. Not only was he trying to solve the problems of a very small region of the world's surface, he was endeavouring to use Western Sicily as a social laboratory where problems of poverty, unemployment, under-employment, ignorance and illiteracy might be analysed and cured in microcosm. His setting up of models for all the world to observe, his sociological studies, his journeys abroad, his calls for help from international experts, have, as their goal, the making of a new world for all mankind.

#### WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL DO YOU WANT?

Although the town of Partinico did not feel the full effect of the 1968 earthquakes, some of the schools were certainly shaken. When I tried to find a small school hall in Partinico in which to hold a concert it was impossible to find one with a floor that could support even a small audience. Some of the schools are housed in very old buildings and the methods of teaching and the equipment belong to a past age. The Dolci children have attended these schools and I myself have visited some of them and held classes in them. The teaching is generally very book-centred and as a rule the rooms display no work executed by the children. In the room in which I used to give my music lessons the walls were decorated with a crucifix, a photograph of the President of the Republic and a coloured chart of the viscera of the sheep! In most of the schools there is no music making of any sort, no drama and no art, no means of aesthetic appreciation and expression. Most of the teaching is formal and authoritarian and in the primary schools consists mainly of instruction in mathematics, reading, writing and religion. There are exceptions, of course; one is a school that I have visited in Cinisi where remarkable work is being done and where the children are alert and interested. But in many of the other schools that I have visited the children spend a great deal of time with books that are much duller in appearance and content than their English counterparts. This book-learning is particularly foreign to children most of whom come from homes where not a single book is to be found and in which there is no quiet place in which to read even if books existed.

It was a knowledge of all these matters that prompted Dolci in 1970 to start planning a New Education Centre as part of the strategy for changing the social structure and at the same time enriching life. It can be regarded as a logical continuation of the hunger strikes, the marches for better living conditions, the campaigns for reservoirs, for farmers' co-operatives and for group discussion. The Education Centre would take into account all that Dolci had learnt in drawing upon the ideas and wishes of both adult and child members of the community. As time went on the Education Centre came to be regarded as a necessary weapon in combating the authoritarian school that was now functioning so disastrously. It is an attempt to create a generation with a new outlook, a generation of children who can think for themselves, observe and draw conclusions from living and working together.

Danilo and his collaborators began to draw upon the knowledge and experience of eminent educators and psychologists the world over – authorities such as Emma Castelnuovo, Lucio Lombardo Radice, Zoltan Dienes, Otto Klineberg, John Galtung and Leonard Covello to name only a few. Many others were invited to advise and Danilo sought to inspect as many different schools as he possibly could during his travels.

In the Foreword to his book *Chissa se i pesci piangono*, Dolci writes of the earthquake-damaged schools and of how the children regard with repugnance the authoritarianism from which they are now completely alienated. He goes on to say that research into the problems of schooling today in every part of the world is as important as the study of cancer.

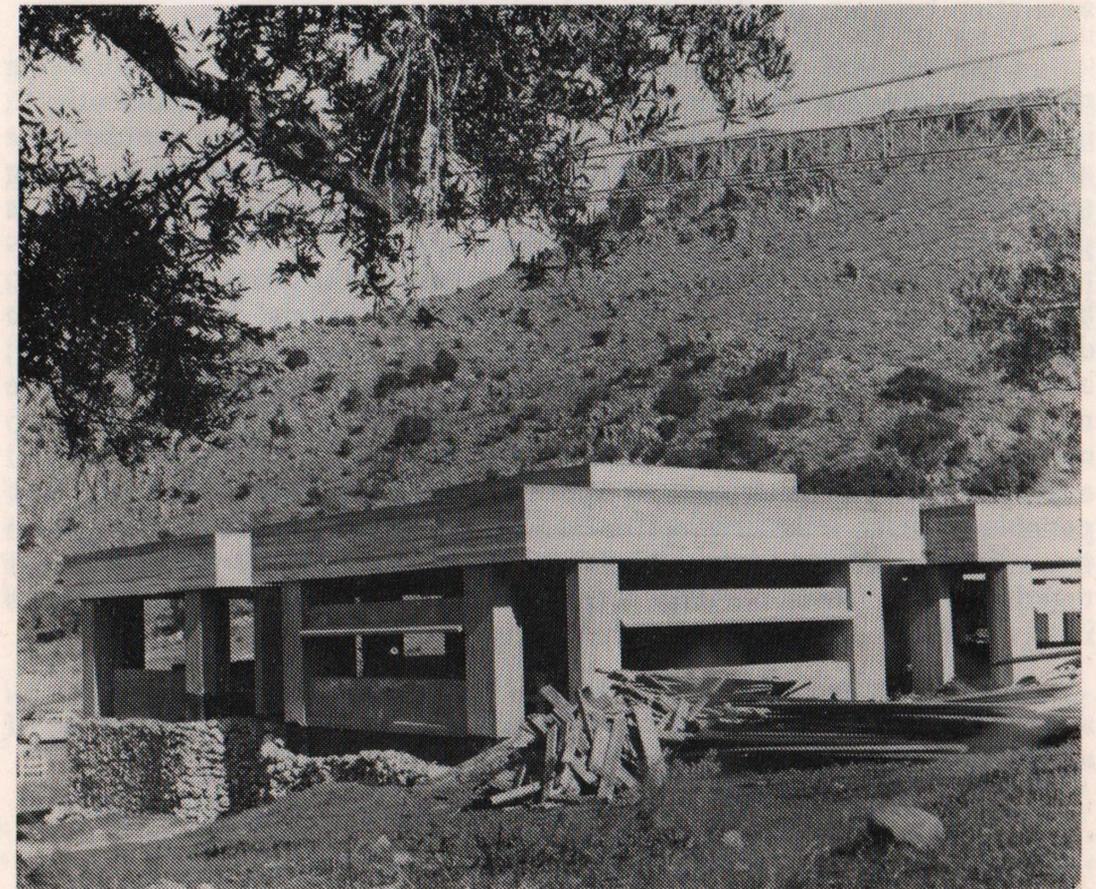
Dolci has always claimed that he learns from the people; so it is a logical step for him to ask them: What sort of school do you want?

In the spring of 1972 he organised a number of meetings with interested people. Reports of these meetings are documented in the first part of *Chissa*. The first report deals with a meeting with mothers who were asked what kind of schooling they desired for their children. The discussion was recorded on tape and later transcribed. The second meeting was with young people of various ages who were asked similar questions. Next came a meeting with local teachers and pupils and another with fathers.

Later a number of seminars were organised in some of which I took part. Children were set to discuss such topics as: What is boredom? What is sorrow? What is joy? What are the different sorts of silence? What is hope? How can man determine his future? There were also meetings at which fathers, mothers, peasants, a fisherman and an astronomer were questioned about their life and ideas. Besides the consideration of abstract matters, groups of children were able to pursue a number of studies such as music, English language, the stars, the sky, photography and pottery.

Danilo's purpose in all this was two-fold: (1) to learn from the people something of their ideas and attitudes, (2) to give children experience in group work. His method in discussion was Socratic, or, to use a little-known word that Dolci has subsequently become very fond of, "maieutic", which the Oxford Dictionary defines as: pertaining to (intellectual) midwifery, i.e. to the Socratic process of helping a person to bring into full consciousness conceptions previously latent in the mind. This idea has become increasingly important as the method to be used in the New Education Centre.

Dolci's idea is to move right away from the old authoritarian ways but not to embrace whole-heartedly modern anti-authoritarian methods which he considers to be "confused and unproductive." Learning will be based on discovery and group work combined with the Socratic method mentioned above, emphasis being on learning rather than on teaching in the old style. It is based on the idea that children are by nature interested in life and their education should be directed towards learning about it from every angle – scientific, sociological, historical and artistic. As far as possible the children will be encouraged to learn from direct experience. They will go out and study the stars, the fishes in the sea, the rocks, soil and flowers;



they will make notes, discuss their findings, form theories, test them and then draw conclusions. Textbooks will be available to enlarge and confirm experiences. The "educator" must guard against falling back into the old role of "teacher" transmitting received knowledge at the risk of stifling individual discovery, but he must be there to encourage and correct when necessary.

Now it would be advisable to read Dolci's own words, taken from an article in the UNESCO Quarterly Review of Education, *Prospects*, Vol. III, No. 2, Summer 1973.

What basic theoretical conclusions have we reached from twenty years of educational activity, and particularly from recent experience? They can be stated quite briefly in a number of points which are the result of mature deliberation and which constitute the premises upon which the new educational centre at Partinico in Sicily is at present based, premises which are open to any modifications which may prove necessary.

The project on which we are now working comprises an educational centre for small children aged between 4 and 6 (space for four groups plus covered recreation areas), two educational centres for the first two cycles, ages 6 to 11 (ten groups), an educational centre for the third cycle, ages 11 to 14 (six groups) various shared facilities and games facilities. No rigid separation between the different cycles is planned.

Learning and development will be based chiefly on the following methods: individual discovery<sup>1</sup>; the process of group discussion (maieutics)<sup>2</sup>, in its simplest form a dialogue through which each individual develops the ability openly to use the group situation to the best advantage, thus working towards the ultimate goal of creating an essentially maieutic society; the participants' individual interests and the study of the environment constituting the basis both of the methods used and of the programme content, between which there will, of necessity, exist a dialectical relationship; the dialectical relationship between discovery and original, creative rediscovery, and the acquisition of the cultural heritage developing outside; those methods for use with individual subjects – both individual and group methods<sup>3</sup> – which are best calculated to promote heightened awareness and organic development; the development of a realization that it is not possible to make only analyses or to make only syntheses and make them too soon; co-ordination in planning, so as to be able to produce things together in the short or long term, and in co-operation with the groups involved in the development of the region.

All the methods above are open to change through new, creative ideas, and even to the taking of risks: we do not want to sink into the routine of a year-long meeting or into a new dogmatism.

<sup>1</sup> See also, "Lettera ai più Giovani", *Iuventare il Futuro*, Laterza, Bari, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> See also, *Conversazioni*, Einaudi, Turin, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Several individual methods have been tried out in the last fifty years.

The use of new terminology, when it is not intended merely to reclothe old concepts, may also be revealing:

<i>Old term</i>	<i>New term</i>
schoolmaster, teacher	educator
pupil	student <sup>1</sup>
school <sup>2</sup>	educational centre
class <sup>3</sup>	group
headmaster	co-ordinator
teacher's platform	—
discipline	responsibility
lecture room	council <sup>4</sup>
grading, tests, examinations	collective assessment, objective and subjective

Certain terms, used in a new context, obviously take on a new meaning. Thus an educator (in the maieutic sense, that is to say someone who educates in a particular method) is a counsellor who fulfils his responsibilities, and anyone may be an educator. Admittedly the syllabus is "written beforehand" but it is written whenever possible together; the book is a collection of pages sewn together but if necessary thought out, written and perhaps also printed together.

In the educational centre which we are planning to set up we do not intend to give special emphasis either to activities (thus avoiding the pitfall of activism) or to mental exercises (avoiding that of intellectualism). As the children develop we shall try to strike a balance between thought and action, and to encourage physical and mental activity in accordance with the following progression: observation, concentration; maieutic elaboration of the initial statement of the problem and of the hypothesis; establishment of a plan of experiments (individual and group) to test the hypothesis; thinking through of the problem (individually and in groups); tentative formulation or verification of the theory; verification of suggested hypothesis; adjustment of the theory.

Thus everyone in the educational centre, where there are no watertight compartments between the arts, the sciences and morality will have a good opportunity to achieve a heightened awareness and to grow in an organic way by discovering methods of developing his analytical powers and his imagination, his ability to act in a way which changes reality.

<sup>1</sup> To study: from the Latin *studere* meaning "to be zealous, keen"; "pupil" meant originally a "ward".

<sup>2</sup> School (from the Greek *skholē*: leisure), originally a place of rest where instruction was given. The word has, of course, been adopted by several languages apart from English including Italian, French, Spanish, Russian, German, Swedish, Finnish.

<sup>3</sup> Class: from the Latin *classis*, army, fleet.

<sup>4</sup> Council: a place for discussion, a deliberative assembly (from the Latin *consiliari*, to take counsel).



Obviously the emphasis will vary according to the various age levels. For young children the emphasis is on play and a carefully protected spontaneity, whereas for older children a sounder relationship with the world, a growing capacity for systematic thought and for the acceptance of responsibilities take on increasing importance. At some point in the progression the drawing of theoretical conclusions from the resultant patterns and structures and the new products of the process are developed each in turn.

The fundamental assumption of the new educational centre is that young children, and children generally, have their own vital interests which they must discover for themselves, and develop together with people who are willing and able to discover, to create and to stimulate interest.

There must be no question of forcing the child to go to the centre: the centre itself must attract him there. The youngest children, until about the age of 8, will have a man and a woman with them.

An educator is essentially an expert in maieutics, by which is meant a process of collective exploration, both theoretical and practical, and which takes as its starting point the experience and the intuition of the individual.

From their earliest years, the children in the groups are encouraged to experiment in finding things out together, to try out ways of understanding one another, of taking decisions together, of working together, of co-ordinating their activities, of each becoming maieutic.

What is wanted is not a teacher who merely talks about music but education in music by a musician. Similarly, the "literary man" does not begin with the alphabet and grammar, but helps with the processes of discovery, and of poetic and linguistic communication; the painter or sculptor helps the children to discover and to express form through drawing, painting and modelling; the mathematician helps them to discover and to formulate quantitative and other relations. The physicist, the chemist and the biologist will work closely together with each of the children in the discovery of physics, chemistry and biology, and an expert in the subject will help them to discover historical and geographical roots and contexts.

Although one must be sure that proper communication is established with the children, what is needed is not a teacher of photography but a photographer who goes off in the morning with the group, each member of which will be able to take his photographs in the mountains, by the sea, in the countryside, in the streets of towns or inside houses. Each member observes, records and develops his photographs individually, then they all discuss the results together. The choice of subjects to be observed is decided together (one of the possible choices being that each one will photograph what he wants) and the process of discovery can be taken up again and carried further.

Basic to everything is the emphasis on answering the question "Why?"

In this respect, the way we want to develop musical expression is revealing. In a confused world, in which music is considered at best as a pleasant "hobby", and therefore as an optional extra, since people have been unable to escape from the crude conception that art should provide "enjoyment of the beautiful", it becomes clear to everyone that one does not say to a child "you must speak" or "you must play an instrument", but on the contrary one says "a blind man is still a man, and so is a deaf man, a dumb man, and also a man who has difficulties of co-ordination; but it is better, obviously, to refuse to be blind, deaf, dumb or unco-ordinated". Kodaly was quite right in saying that the musical culture of a country cannot be a matter for the musicians alone, that it is something which involves the people as a whole, and that everyone shares in it, even children. And this is true of any form or aspect of culture; it cannot be created solely by specialists. A healthy person learns to use his ears, his eyes, his hands, his mouth, his whole being; one does not aspire, obviously, to make geniuses of everybody or to make them geniuses at everything, but one cannot resign oneself to growing up insensitive and limited. Education involves various forms of discovery and expression and its aim is organic development. A group learns about a subject, whenever possible, by talking about it and writing about it, by analysing and photographing, by drawing

and modelling, by putting it into practice, by thinking about it, i.e. experiencing the subject in the most appropriate way. Various forms of learning have to be tried out in order to work towards a unitary form of learning. Cross-disciplinary dynamics are then incorporated with inter-group dynamics.

From the very beginning, the relationship between the centre and the children's families must be clear. There is a hypothesis which needs to be carefully verified. The adult does not himself aim to co-ordinate, but wants co-ordination, a co-ordinated life. Though responsive to every spontaneous impulse, we certainly do not consider that democracy is the same thing as *laissez-faire*. The adult exists and has a certain stock of accumulated experience: he wants to verify it with others, not to feel that the alternative is imposing it or suicide. The method is improved, month by month, year by year, and not by educators alone or by the educators and the families, but by the children, the educators and the parents together. They also study the possible relationship between the experience of the centre itself, and other experiences, including those of other schools.

There should be no gap between the educational centre and life: the mother, the peasant, the artisan, the workman and the co-operative member will bring their problems and they will be studied together. To this end there must be close contact with the problems of the local population, whose experience is turned to good account in a dialectical manner. Though apart from the houses of Partinico, the centre is at the heart of its day-to-day activities.

All around in the plain below, the local people are transforming the land with water from the reservoir; people can see and feel that the face of their land is being changed, day by day. In the evening the centre continues to be a centre of life, linked with the life of the town.

The location of the centre enables it to partake not only of the toil of the countryside but also of the silence – or the voices – of the mountain. The centre's radio station will not be just for show but will offer an opportunity for participation and real contact with the whole of the audience concerned.

The very idea of the children being cut off – for better or worse – from the more dynamic outside world is unacceptable. Italian, French and German are becoming dialect languages, as has already happened in the case of Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. A knowledge of linguistic roots is essential, but the relationship with the world as a whole begins in childhood. The serious study of English begins from the age of 10 (a certain knowledge of Russian also, and at least 100 Chinese characters, learnt as a sort of game), but the children can already sing in different languages, and are thus prepared for different phonetic systems: there is a rich store of music which can be used for this purpose. In order for small children to learn a language, it seems they need to have among them someone who speaks to

them only in his native language (English for example), in games, in activities, in everyday life; it is also necessary that this person should give the children a sense of security and a natural interest in the world in which another language is spoken. Thus the child learns the language, by hearing it and speaking it, absorbing it, in fact: one learns languages in order to communicate with people of whom one is fond ("living or dead", says Bryan Dutton). Technical devices and, if possible, travel, can later improve this background but it would be ridiculous to use them merely to effect a breakthrough.

Experiments during the coming years will allow us to see more clearly what form the different courses for young people over the age of 14 should take. In the meantime, the following is the programming method we have tried out and which we intend to improve upon: (a) meetings with local groups of children, educators, parents; (b) seminars of a general nature on the problem of educational development with experts (educational experts in different subjects, architects, psychologists, technologists, experts in socio-economic work, etc.); (c) formulation of the first draft; (d) further meetings with children, parents, educators; (e) further documented experimentation; (f) publication of documentary material; (g) discussion with specialists (and also scientists and artists) on the notes relating to the method and the draft of the project; (h) reconsideration and modifications; (i) finalization of the project; (j) start of operations of the centre.

We are aware that the tone in which these assumptions are presented is almost peremptory, and that this is apparently at variance with the maieutic principle; we regard as essential for educational development the dialectical process which takes place between consciously assuming responsibility and using maieutic means to develop in other people the capacity for choice and the acceptance of responsibility.

At the end of the week, each group meets to discuss, with a different co-ordinator each time, the following: (a) the report of the evaluation unit which prepares a critical assessment of the week's activity and the methods adopted during the week (this unit changes each week); (b) the notes, daily records concerning each day's discoveries.

Attention must be paid to the need for integrating practical and theoretical work: the tendency with the former is to generalize from one's own experiences, with the latter to get out of focus by attempting to see into the future. Attention must be paid to the processes of empathy, in the sense in which Klineberg uses the term, so that bad feelings and pointless conflicts may be avoided, not in order that other people's points of view may be automatically accepted, but that they may be understood (for this purpose, it might be possible to use modern apparatus like the video tape-recorder, which it may be possible to link up with individual households, almost all of which, however poor they may be, have television – though we do not claim that such machines deserve uncritical veneration). In order

to establish peace throughout the world it is essential to get rid of people's confused aggressivity.

Every week at least one close acquaintance of the children should take part in the activities of each group.

In order to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding, I should like finally to explain two points which I consider fundamental. It is essential to begin gradually. We know that, even under the most favourable conditions, shutting up thirty children and one adult in a classroom for several hours a day, over a period of eight or nine months, and shutting up a thousand or so children and thirty or so adults in a school for a year can result in a relationship of authoritarian tendency and, by a process of reaction, in the near-chaos of spontaneism.

A relationship based on knowing each other and on building up the kind of respect which recognizes the individual value of each member of the group is something quite different, and allows the new community to develop over the years, on the basis of its own achievements in terms of method and civilized behaviour.

I am also convinced that nobody can raise any valid objections to the use of the maieutic approach in facing any new problem, or acquiring experience or knowledge.

It is in any case something positive if one is able to know by direct means how each individual thinks (making use of the meeting as a sociological indicator, on the level both of the individual and of the group). One should generally start off from what the children consider it necessary to know from subjects which interest them, thus setting off an organic process based on the individual's own experience. This applies particularly to cases when the children themselves take responsibility for the co-ordination of research or group work: the acquisition of basic experience, a closer and deeper participation, the acceptance of responsibility for getting on with their work gradually extend the limits imposed by the children's lack of experience. Obviously, in this way, certain questions which do not necessarily require precise answers can usefully be tackled (for example: "What different kinds of silence can there be? What is destiny? What is hope?") and the adults can contribute an accumulated stock of ideas, if not of knowledge and sure answers.

The problem arises in a different form when there exists an accumulation of scientific data and ideas (although the meaning of the term science needs to be kept under constant revision) which it would be presumptuous and absurd to ignore, although difficult to verify.

As Chiara said to the astronomer: "I believe that each of us now feels the urge to observe and to study better and study more." But it is true that when we are "too far out of our depth" we can get stuck, and are in danger of staying that way, or of easily losing interest.

The old type of geography lesson is generally rather grim, but, on the other hand, there can be no question of throwing away atlases and maps and being satisfied with knowing only the places we can actually visit.

This is the area, I think, in which the most difficult problems arise. I believe we must take great care to avoid the subterfuge of using the maieutic approach as a means of making the pupils more receptive and arousing their interest merely so as to enable the adult to drum in his lesson more effectively. I think that a way of solving the different problems which arise can be found through collaboration among the children, the educators and the subject expert, that is to say by trying, within a given subject, to find ways of rediscovering, verifying or acquiring new knowledge without breaks in continuity, gaps of fragmentation. It is also necessary to offer starting points corresponding to the children's basic interests.

It is one thing, as Klineberg says, for example, to memorise something from a biology textbook, and quite another thing to examine together with the children the question why one of them is like his father or his mother, why he is different from other people, even from his brothers, why his skin is a different colour, why he is a particular height and not some other height, why our health depends on the different food we eat or whether we eat at all.

A midwife helps to bring forth the new life which the mother carries within her. Thus if we ask ourselves or ask others, for example, what are hope or love or life, an answer will tend to emerge, since everyone has hoped, loved, lived, in other words already has within him the seeds of an answer. Hope is like triangles, when one is motivated enough one can begin to study them, and when one is ready to understand them one can understand them.

In particular fields it is essential to broaden the group maieutic approach to include those who, like Galileo, Torricelli, Lavoisier, Boyle, Newton, Huygens, Young, Fresnel, de Saussure, Volta, Galvani, Darwin, Freud, Adam Smith and Marx, saw the world in a new light, making experiments with simple instruments but with profound insight and practising science as a human activity.

The instinctive objections to this approach are not without foundation: children have no culture; requests often do not come from the children; one has to act fast – it is impossible for everyone to rediscover everything; methodical verification cannot be the only basis for work; the justification, according to Socrates, of the maieutic method was that knowledge was for him a recall of what one already knew.

One must look beyond the Socratic fable – and beyond the Socratic model itself – and pick out the essential point: how is one to deepen or extend the power of observation, to exercise it and give it expression in

various ways, to deepen and develop personal experience in order to try to solve the problems which face us in everyday life.

One can go far by working together to find a valid basis for research, work and verification: one interest may lead to another in a never-ending chain.

A work of education, like a work of art, comes into being as it develops and it evolves in a way which is by definition unforeseeable.

Soon after projects for the Education Centre were afoot Dolci gained the sympathy and support of many Americans. For example, quite early on Frank Oppenheimer sent materials for an "Exploratorium" and the Ford Foundation promised its support. It was due to the good offices of the Foundation and the Institute of International Education that Dolci was able to spend the month of January 1973 in a research tour of schools and educational establishments in the United States. Among the many places that the indefatigable Danilo visited were: in New York City, the East Harlem Bloch Schools, the City College Workshop Center for Open Education, the Bank Street School for Children and the Community Resources Institute; in Georgia, the East Central Committee for Opportunity; in California, the 1910 Synanon Ocean Front Boulevard, The Tutorial Community Project of Los Angeles City, the Exploratorium of San Francisco, the Laurence Hall of Science and the Jefferson Elementary School of Berkeley; in Massachusetts, the Trotter School and the Education Development Centre at Newton. Dolci carefully documented his positive and negative impressions and these are fully reported in Giuseppe Casarrubea's *Aspetti di una alternativa culturale dalla Sicilia occidentale* (Celebes Editore, Trapani, 1974, pp. 177-193).

Much advice was taken from a host of other people and later an Advisory Panel, some members of which are of international repute, was set up to advise on pedagogic methods. The Panel includes such names as M. Piaget, an authority on child psychology, Otto Klineberg, Jaques Veneche, Johan Galtung, Ettore Gelpes, Olle Edholm, James Bruni and Professor Ross D. Waller. Musicians of the panel include Ferdinand Conrad, Edgar Hunt, Edwin Alton and the Sicilian composer Eliodoro Sollima. Mr. Jim Rose, the Headmaster of a Leicester Primary School and an authority on the teaching of science in the Junior School, has visited Trappeto, and Dolci, accompanied by Edwin Alton, has visited his school. Danilo has also visited Dartington School at Totnes and the then Headmaster, Dr. Royston Lambert, visited Sicily.

James Bruni spent some time in Sicily considering the teaching of mathematics because he feels that it offers an excellent starting point for the development of the active, creative method of learning that is to be used in the New Education Centre. A summary of his ideas may be useful here.

We must start, he says, with the interests of the child. Mathematical concepts are abstract, but children need to begin with concrete materials. A child does not understand the concept of number by reciting numbers in order; he must develop it by examining collections of things like stones, buttons, or leaves, by comparing, matching, grouping. The stress should not be on memorising mathematical facts but on understanding concepts through actively using materials. Understanding can be enhanced by attempting to use an inductive method of teaching, attempting to guide the child to make discoveries of some basic idea through his free activity with things. This type of learning demands individual work in small groups. In this way respect is shown for differences amongst children. The study of mathematics should not be divorced from "real" situations and should be integrated with other subjects whenever possible. It should be regarded as one way, one out of many ways, of looking at a particular experience. The older generation tend to reduce mathematical aspects of an experience into a set of written, abstract symbols. Bruni gives an example. If, he says, we have six tables in the room and we get two more we rush to write:  $6 + 2 = 8$ . But with the young we must not omit the intermediate step of discussion in which the child can explore the situation verbally, in this way exploring ways of communicating the information. We can thus finally arrive at the use of conventional mathematical notation, premature use of which can be quite meaningless to a child.

My own ideas on children's music-making might also be of interest. Just as a child uses words in speech and writing before he has any understanding of grammar, so children must begin to make music before they understand the lines and dots that make up a musical score. This music making starts in the early years of a child's life, using genuine musical instruments such as chime bars, xylophones, glockenspiels, various plucked instruments, drums, bells, etc., all designed for a child's use. This is a group activity and in the early stages the child should be encouraged to provide accompaniment for songs and to create melodies. The grammar of music along with the written record of it comes later as and when the child is ready for it. The child needs much experience of sounds and rhythms and this should be provided in a free and creative way.

In the New Education Centre the work will be done in groups of not more than fifteen - fewer in the infant groups. It will be co-ordinated, not by a "teacher" but by the pupils in turn. The role of the "teacher" or "educator" as Dolci prefers to call him or her, will be to act as a consultant in the subject in which he is an expert, stimulating, advising, and, above all, drawing thoughts and judgments out of the children. There will be two groups of fifteen pupils, i.e. thirty children, to each year. The division into age groups will not be rigid; the pupils will be able to work in the group which best serves their interests and maturity, and they will be allowed to move on at their own speed. The small size of the group means that the teacher/pupil ratio will therefore be small and costly. It has been

agreed that the teachers will be known by their Christian names and the "tu" – the intimate – form of address will be used.

Although there is to be much scope for experimentation, the Centre will be divided into three cycles. The first of these is for children of four to five years, the emphasis being on self-expression in drawing, painting, modelling and music-making. At the same time the pupils will be encouraged to concentrate, to relate facts to each other and to make judgments. Reading and number will aim at furthering this process rather than being ends in themselves. At this early stage groups will have both male and female "Educators" representing something of a family structure.

The second cycle starts when the children have begun to develop the ability to make critical judgments and are capable of working in groups. It is here that they will be encouraged to organise themselves, to work as a group and to explore their surroundings.

The third cycle will consist of children from 10 to 14 years who should have by this age, developed some original thought and some ability in self-expression. Here, group-learning should come into its own, and history should take on a fresh meaning, studied not through kings and heroes but through more mundane figures such as reformers and radical thinkers. Here, too, the children will be encouraged to create – poetry, pictures and music.

Traditional subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics, literature and the sciences will be included in the curriculum as well as art, music, dancing, drama and crafts such as photography and modelling. These latter will be an essential part of the learning situation and not included as "extras."

As at present envisaged, the child's career at the Centre will end at the age of fourteen, but it is hoped that in time schemes will be devised to enable pupils to continue to higher education without the move to other educational establishments.

Since one of the fundamental aims of the New Centre is to alter the structure of Sicilian society, the greatest importance is attached to forging links with the local community. Parents and members of the public will be encouraged to participate in the running of the establishment and fathers and mothers will be able to sit in on classes. Since the children will study local history and geography they will be encouraged to discuss local problems directly with people concerned. It is planned to set up a short wave radio station and a newspaper in order to establish a dialogue between the pupils and their environment.

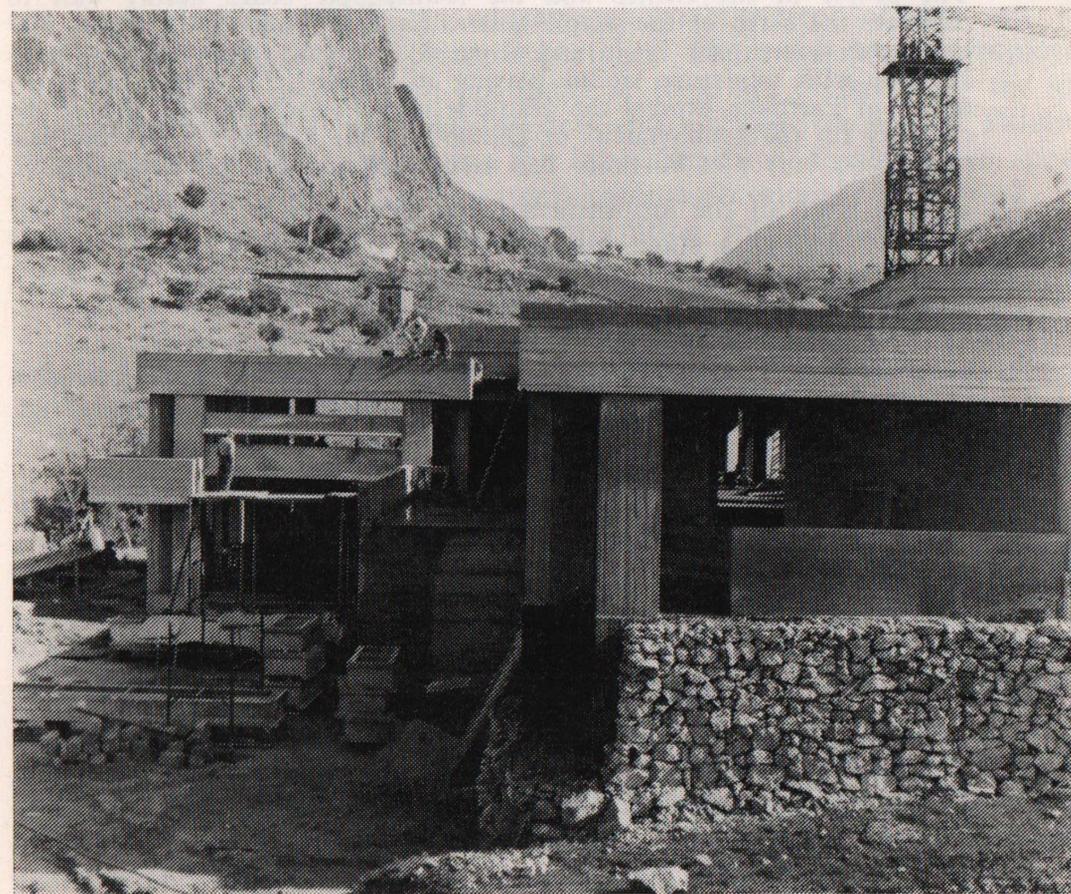
Regarding discipline, Dolci is determined that it shall be neither "permissive" nor imposed from above. The children are to be taught to control themselves and to show consideration for others. Discipline means responsibility, and the Centre itself is to be as free as possible from the unpleasant associations so long evoked by the very word "school". For this

reason the headmaster will be called "co-ordinator", a pupil "a student" and marks and grades of work will be replaced by collective evaluations.

The site chosen for the New Centre includes a small mountain on top of which a cabin will be built to enable children to study the stars or just to be alone. In the main buildings there will be ovens and stoves with which the children can cook and make bread. In the printing room they will be able to produce their own magazines and newspapers. The pupils will be encouraged to read their papers and view television critically so as to recognise biased or inaccurate reporting.

#### Practical matters

In 1970 a search was started for a suitable piece of land for the project. The greatest care was taken and children and others concerned were consulted. One old friend of Danilo's, the eighty-year-old "Zu Sariddu", pointed out a place near a mountain within sight of land irrigated by the Iato Reservoir and the sea. It is Mirto Santa Caterina, on the outskirts of the town of Partinico, in an angle of the mountain which dominates the town. It is a lovely tranquil valley with the remains of an old water mill, and affords a sweeping panorama of the uplands with the town of Alcamo in the distance. As we walked there in the failing light of a June evening when visiting the workmen who were excavating during the cooler hours



of the night, we could hear the tinkle of sheep bells and, on occasion, we passed a shepherd milking his sheep by the side of the path. A stream of running water, a thing not often seen in Sicily, flows across the land and it will be dammed to make a lake.

In November 1970 a contract was signed for the purchase of ten hectares of the land for the sum of 30 million lire (about £20,000). Funds were lacking even to pay the deposit and the final settlement date was in March 1971. But somehow the deposit was scraped together even though Dolci's collaborators, many with families to support, agreed to forego their salaries. The balance of the deposit came from the German Evangelical Church movement *Brot für die Welt* (Bread for the World) arriving as if by miracle within one day of the expiry of the contract. The final purchase price was made up by Sonning Prize money that had been awarded to Danilo, and various other donations, and together these enabled some further pieces of land to be bought.

An amphitheatre was quickly hewn out of the mountain side. To quote Jerre Mangione, the author of the book *A Passion for Sicilians*:

Nature, as if expressing her approval of the whole enterprise, provided a dazzling surprise when workers began carving out the amphitheatre: the mountain stone turned out to be white marble! The whole thing looks like a giant jewel.

The people of the Centro and the townspeople could hardly wait to celebrate the birth of the amphitheatre. Early in June (1973) some 800 men and women sat in it and listened to some sixty children from Palermo with miniature violins playing in concert. They also heard the mayor of Partinico express the gratitude of his administration and of the citizenry for the achievements of Danilo and the Centro. It was the first time that a mayor of Partinico had made such a public announcement.

An area in front of the amphitheatre has been levelled and walled off and this can be used as a stage for drama and music. The site is one of unforgettable beauty as the gentle breeze stirs the sparse trees that form the background.

A sports area is in the process of preparation adjoining the amphitheatre and it is expected that the Italian State will defray at least 70% of the cost of this.

The buildings have been designed by a husband and wife team of Milanese architects – the late Giovanna Polo and her husband Giancarlo – who have given most generously of their services free of all charge. The death of Giovanna Polo before the completion of the project has been a great blow to all those who knew her. The style of the buildings is modern and functional in pre-stressed concrete, designed to withstand earthquakes.

An important feature of the planning of the workrooms is to be the absence of the traditional rows of desks; instead there will be movable tables, some round for group work. There will also be areas where a child can be alone and silent; the importance of this can be appreciated when it is borne in mind that the majority of the children will be drawn from homes where

almost the whole of living is done in a single room where facilities for study or reading are well-nigh impossible and where it is impossible to be alone. The workrooms will be provided with running hot water, thus being probably the only schoolrooms in Sicily with such a commodity.

The Education Centre is being planned with a total of 300 children in mind. It is expected that the bulk of these will be children of peasants living in the area, preference being given to families most in need and to those who have participated in Dolci-inspired co-operatives and such like activities. The success of the enterprise will depend on the interest aroused amongst both children and parents. Danilo insists that no child should be compelled to attend but should feel "drawn to it, fascinated and absorbed by it." It may well be that the free, democratic approach to be fostered at the Centre will clash with the strict, patriarchal discipline still to be found in many Sicilian families where it is not the custom for the child to have any say in family matters. Dolci already fears that harmful conflicts could arise between school and home. It is partly for this reason that parents will be encouraged to participate fully in the working of the Centre.

The New Education Centre is to be officially recognised by the Italian State as an experimental school. This means that although the building and equipment must be provided privately, the State will pay the salaries of the teachers even though they are chosen by the founders.

It is obvious that in an educational establishment of this sort the teachers are going to be of prime importance. There are many unemployed schoolteachers in the area but not many of these are prepared for the sort of teaching envisaged here. Headmasters and assistant teachers of Palermo and district have met to discuss the New Centre and some have shown interest. Mr. Jim Rose, the Leicester headmaster already mentioned, has spent some time at The Borgo demonstrating with children methods of science study. Libera Dolci, Danilo's eldest daughter, has spent some weeks in England studying methods of infant teaching at Dartington School near Totnes, and elsewhere in England, and she has also spent time in America studying American methods. She is now devoting all her time working in the part of the Centre which is already functioning. It is likely that other Dolci children will play an active part in the Centre when their training is completed. The provision of teachers is being planned at a number of different levels. For selection, a three-man committee has been set up consisting of a Professor of Education from Palermo, Professor Giuseppe Casarrubea, a teacher who has been associated with Dolci for some time and about whom Danilo has written in *Chissa se i pesci piangono*, and Danilo himself. In some cases the committee seeks advice in making choices, but in some cases they feel that they can act alone. There are a few local people who, in various ways, have made a contribution to teaching children using the new methods – and, incidentally discovering some of the difficulties, not the least of which is getting the parents involved. At the level of pedagogic methods in general, and for particular subjects, the loosely structured Advisory Panel, already mentioned, is able to give advice.



It is important that this Education Centre be seen as part of the community and not apart from it, and efforts must be made to see that its students do not form any sort of elite. It is not to be regarded as a rival to existing schools but to serve as a model with the intention of offering to others the expertise it hopes to develop. Indeed, as has been said, the Centre is designed to be an attempt at "democratisation". Its ideas will be relevant to all parts of the world as an attempt to give students the opportunity for the fullest development of human faculties and for the playing of a full role in the life of the community. Partly to help in this purpose, and also that the adult part of the population might have a place of their own in which to meet, a Community Centre is to be incorporated in the plans.

#### Time Table of planning

As a result of pledges of support already received, the following programme has been drawn up:

Workrooms for sixty 4-5-year-olds. This is already nearing completion at the time of writing and is now in use.

Workrooms for sixty 6-7-year-olds. This is in the process of being built and should be in use by the summer of 1975.

The Community Centre is to be completed by the summer of 1975.

The Amphitheatre is already completed and has cost about half the cost of a workroom.

Workrooms for the 8-10-year-olds. The construction of these depends on funds available and it is hoped that they may be in use by June 1976.

Rooms for the 11-14-year-olds are to follow in 1977 if money is forthcoming.

A Museum is to be constructed with exhibits in part contributed by the children themselves, alongside other exhibits from many parts of the world. For example, there are to be objects that have survived the Hiroshima bombing, including fused glass bottles, that will impress the children in a way no words can do.

It is believed that the New Education Centre will take four to five years to complete. In 1973 the total cost was estimated at £250,000, less than the cost of an orthodox school put up by the Italian State. One fears, however, that inflation, now almost world-wide, will have a great effect.

The purchase of the land has already been mentioned. The German Churches again pledged support for the first phase of the building and appeals were launched in various supporting countries. During 1972 and 1973 a good deal of preparatory work was done in clearing the land, levelling, tree planting, landscaping and levelling the sports area. A cabin for the electricity plant was erected and an access road for construction traffic was made. The old road into the valley skirts a long, high ruinous wall and is too narrow and ill-maintained at present for motor traffic. The Municipality of Partinico has promised to finance the construction of a well-surfaced road to the school.

Early in 1974 work on the foundations was begun and very soon inflation began to bite deeply into the funds. In some cases estimates had to be almost doubled and some creditors began pressing for repayment. As so often in the past, Danilo and his collaborators became short of cash. It was feared that their telephones would be cut off unless bills were paid, and letters had to be sent out with a 5 lire stamp, and all manner of economies made. There was, too, a shortage of materials. Cement was difficult to get and sometimes had to be brought from as far away as Rome, with consequent high costs for transport. It had often to be bought in small quantities at exorbitant



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I N T E R I M N E W S L E T T E R

February 1976.

Italy, and above all Sicily, has more pressing social problems than we have - a situation that could lead to despair; but there is no despair in Partinico, indeed there is a sense of achievement in the air. The New Education Centre began its teaching work early in 1975 and further building is proceeding. Our Chairman, Edwin Alton, paid another long visit to Sicily and actually worked in the school. This bulletin will be largely taken up by his report.

Chairman's Report of his visit to Sicily.

Almost the first thing I became aware of was the alteration in the plans for the Education Centre. Costs have risen so steeply that projects for further building have had to be greatly modified, but we believe that the service that the establishment will render to the community will in no way be impaired.

When I arrived in early May the First Phase, called Corpo A, that for the 4-5 year olds, was completed, and since then the Second Phase - Corpo B - has been completed. The squat greyish-white buildings built to withstand earthquakes and backed by the old white-washed water mill, now occupied by the caretaker, look somewhat incongruous in the lovely rural surroundings of the valley of Mirto Santa Caterina, but I feel sure that they will soon lose their new look and harmonise with the landscape.

The section in which I worked consists of a partially-covered terrace, a temporary kitchen, a room for the 'educators' and an entrance hall where the children change into soft shoes. The floor above consists of two large workrooms and a carpeted assembly hall with a stage at one end and a dining section at the other. The workrooms, measuring about 72 feet by 30 feet, are each divided into two sections, each section providing working space for a group of 15 children. Sixty children are thus catered for in Corpo A. The furniture is designed so that it can be arranged in a variety of formations, and there are small cubicles fitted with beds to accommodate either dolls or children, ample windows and benches.

The children are collected at various points in the town of Partinico and conveyed to the school in a minibus donated by German subscribers. On accompanying the children to school one would think that the party was setting out for the beach rather than for school; the phrase "unwillingly to school" certainly does not apply here! The attitude of the 'educators' is kind and affectionate and for most of the time the children play amicably together. I spent many hours at the school, sharing the work of the educators and also doing music - playing to the children, singing with them and teaching a few of the older ones to play a few notes on the recorder. I noted a shortage of educational games and toys and discussed this with Danilo. I was also able to make suggestions about apparatus that can be bought or made by teachers and have learnt recently that some educational material of this nature has now been obtained.

I left with the greatest admiration for the work being done at the New Education Centre. Kind friends have already made offers of teaching material and some has already been received, some, alas! of unsuitable quality. I feel that if friends wish to help, money to enable Danilo to purchase things he really needs will be much more acceptable. Teaching in Corpo B will commence early in 1976. All this means that more money is needed. On the 16th May a meeting was held at Partinico at which the main topic was finance, and since then Danilo has visited several places on the

Continent in an endeavour to find fresh sources of cash. Great expenses have been incurred and the need for funds is as great as ever.

I was able to continue my work with groups of recorder players and we gave a concert at the Education Centre in early June.

#### Irrigation and the Iato Dam.

The last winter was one of the driest on record for Sicily and Palermo reported a serious water shortage. Irrigation for cultivation purposes has not yet had the success hoped for because the first piping laid down was of wrong or poor quality and this caused frequent breaks in the system. Because of this the extension of irrigation has been retarded and not enough water is yet reaching the Partinico and Trappeto areas.

#### The Borgo.

A very impressive programme of events had been planned for the summer and autumn of 1975 but because of a variety of reasons not all of them took place. Most of the meetings and seminars were in some way connected with education. The two American workers Dorie and Larry Baldassaro were doing excellent work.

#### The Earthquake Zone.

I also paid several visits to the earthquake area, saw some of the new housing and talked with the people. I hope to give a fuller report of the situation in a future bulletin.

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#### Etna-Taormina Prize for Poetry.

On 12th May Danilo received the Etna-Taormina Prize for Poetry for his book Poema Umano, a volume of his selected poems. He shared the prize with Rafael Alberti and Toni Kienlechner at a ceremony in the Teatro Massimo at Catania. Alberti is a very well-known anti-fascist poet, Kienlechner, a German, has received acclaim for his translations of the work of Carlo Emilio Gadda. We feel sure that our subscribers will be happy to learn of this further recognition of Danilo's work. To many of us, Dolci seems a somewhat remote figure, but a reading of his poetry brings the real personality much closer. It is a pity that little of his verse is in translation, but publishers are most reluctant to issue volumes of verse, especially in translation.

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The need for money for Sicily is as great as ever. The Trustees are constantly on the look-out for new sources and are ever-vigilant of the right use of money we receive. We are sending our Statement of Accounts and Balance Sheet for the year ended last April with this Newsletter. We have greatly reduced our administrative costs during 1975, thanks to the excellent voluntary work of our Hon. Secretary, Mrs. Betty Paul.

The Trustees have decided, reluctantly, that due to the greatly increased cost of postage we will no longer send receipts for donations unless specifically asked to do so. Cheques, as you know, really require no receipt, but if for any reason a subscriber would like to have a receipt we shall be pleased to send one.

We should like to thank all our subscribers for their continued support of Danilo Dolci's work in these difficult times.