

May 30, 1972

Dr. Marshall Stone
President, IACME
Department of Mathematics
202 Arnold House
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts 01002

Dear Dr. Stone,

I could not have been more surprised than I was when I received your recent letter from Paris inviting me to the conference in Bahia Blanca next November. After considerable reflection I would like to accept.

If you kindly will allow me to share my thoughts of even hesitating, I will now do so.

- 1) I do not consider myself in the same "league" with Madame Papy, Edith Biggs and Zed Dienes. They are professionals, I am not. They have (Papy and Dienes) an overriding theoretical framework; I am a pragmatist. My main interest is people of all ages, and particularly people as learners, and I get delight in being involved in their (and therefore my own) learning process. Mathematics education in the narrow sense is not even my present most passionate interest, though it permeates in the larger sense all that I am involved in.
- 2) I do not have a mastery of Spanish. I feel very ashamed to be a guest of Latin-Americans and not communicate with them in their own language. (I will later give some suggestions as to how I might be able to overcome that obstacle.)
- 3) I know nothing about the objectives of the conference, who will attend, how formal it is, what might actually flow into the mainstream of the education in the various countries as a result of such meetings.

(It would be helpful for me to receive proceedings or summations to familiarize myself with the first two conferences.)

Why then would I like to come and find myself already engrossed in planning?

I have traveled widely in Chile, Peru and Ecuador particularly and have a "feel" for the type of education in vogue in the urban centers the private schools and public (what a difference!) and the even vaster educational desert of the small towns and rural areas.

Something must be done in primary education!! Primary education outside the cities -if interpreted as the first school experience- is for all age groups, not just for small children. It is the most urgent need of these countries for the masses of people.

At this moment I can see what I have learned from the slums of Philadelphia in addition to the knowledge gained from the fishing populations of Nova Scotia and the observations of working with Puerto Rican teachers.

For these vastly different undereducated and poor peoples listed above, school life and adult education must be closely adopted to local resources, local environment studies and local culture – and at the same time concern itself with thinking skills, fields of inquiry which put the young child or the undereducated adult on the road to the main stream of educated, technological society. Thus I am not speaking of “practical education” to continue the tradition of hewers of wood and carriers of water, to perpetuate the class and caste system as it now exist in most Latin-American countries.

I should make a difference however of where and how one starts whether one teaches primary children in the altiplano of Peru, a coastal jungle village in Ecuador, the urban desert jungle shanty dwellings of Lima or Rio. Now, there is no difference, for none has anything but an old chalkboard, a handful of obsolete books, and rote copying. This after at least 10-15 years of aid from the mathematics educators of developed countries, substantial fellowships to the U.S. for study, development of several local textbook series in modern math.

If teaching of mathematics has changed in the elementary schools in most of these countries, it has changed in a few select government schools connected with universities or in the subsidized private tuition schools. Though perhaps a start has been made and a better base has been given to the college oriented student – it simply does not reach the majority.

I know that all this (if true) is not new to you. What is new to me though is the fact that – ignoring for the moment politics – Cuba, Peru, Chile and Mexico probably (I am sure there are others) are beginning or have succeeded in making mass education a national priority.

What kind of models do we mathematics educators hold out to them from our knowledge? Are they Catherine Stern, Gatego, Dienes, Papy – all people who have made magnificent contributions in developed western countries – though not even there are their insights woven into the fabric of the education for most children? Is the model that we should set before people to be useful in their realities perhaps simply be the example of imagination and courage and hard work involved in breaking out of the uninspired, unproductive way of teaching. It is the analysis of what is wrong, a sophisticated plan for correction based on better knowledge of child psychology, mathematics and available material resources that is the genius of any of these leaders.

I therefore see my role, if you still will have me, as one of those experienced teachers who though no expert has struggled over the years to relate what she has learned

from some of the innovators and experts to what she could comprehend and learn on her own and from the lives of the children and teachers she taught. My knowledge thus is tentative and forever under revision. I would like to “experiment” with teaching through workshop built around locally available and inexpensive resources, how mathematics or “pre-mathematics” can be approached if you are in tune with local opportunities.

My husband, who has done much teacher education himself and with whom I worked in Puerto Rico for a week last year, will be glad to assist me. We will find all we need in the locality where we will meet.

If I could dream – I would like to invite a Chilean teacher, educator who is bilingual and knows my work in U.S. and has applied some of it in Chile, to join us. Then we could work as a bilingual team.

I am looking forward to your answer to this rambling letter. I can promise not to embarrass you regardless of who the “Inter-Americans” are but I can’t help to try to make sense to myself before accepting.

Sincerely,

Lore Rasmussen