

Pestalozzi International

To nurture and develop

Background to Education

in Europe in Pestalozzi's Time

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Content Summary

This document provides an overview of the historical context of education in Europe leading up to and during the time of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827). Drawing primarily from J.A. Green's *Life and Work of Pestalozzi*, it traces the evolution of educational thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and beyond, highlighting key intellectual, religious, and political movements that influenced educational theory and practice.

It examines the transition from Church-dominated schooling to more secular and democratic models, the impact of the Reformation, the rise of scientific inquiry, the influence of Enlightenment ideals, and the development of philanthropic and utilitarian approaches to education. It refers to philosophers such as Rousseau and reformers like Francke and Basedow for their contributions to child-centred and practical education. Finally, the document explores the specific Swiss context that shaped Pestalozzi's own reformist vision and underscores the broader social and political movements, such as the French and Swiss Revolutions, that spurred public interest in education as a tool for social betterment.

The Renaissance (the revival, from the 14th to the 16th century, of European art and literature, under the influence of classical models)

Until the Renaissance, European schools taught only the written word. The church controlled them. Education was a preparation for the church. Changes came about as the spirit of the Renaissance spread across Europe. Scholars studied the classics and found a native literature and a native civilisation older than the Church. Schools were no longer limited by the Church's ideas about education. The invention of printing (from around 1450) meant that there were no longer so few books and it was easier to educate more people. The intellectual activity in schools grew. Education became more democratic and was no longer only for religious purposes. Education was now available for anyone with the ability, money and time. People began to make the most of the life they had in this world instead of only worrying about life after death. It became important to distinguish oneself by doing well. People also began to be curious about things. Learning to do with human culture – literature, history, art, music and philosophy - became important.

Primary schools and higher schools became separate because of these changes. The educational ladder was broken because most higher education stopped being controlled by the Church. Universities and higher schools changed so much that the continuity between primary and higher education was lost. Books were seen as the only worthwhile source of knowledge and higher schools tended to teach nothing except the classical languages – a 'scholar' was someone who could read and write Latin and Greek. In primary schools, however, boys were still taught what the Church needed, such as what was necessary to be a choirboy. Changes in higher education meant that someone who did well in primary school could not necessarily take up the new studies in the higher schools.

There was no education for girls at this time.

The Reformation (A 16th century movement for the reform of abuses in the Roman Church, ending in the establishment of the Reformed and Protestant Churches)

The German, Martin Luther, a key figure of the Reformation, was interested in primary level education. He wanted each individual to be able to find out for himself or herself what his or her duty to God was. So he wanted education to be compulsory and universal. All children, boys and girls, should learn to read the Bible. Therefore, since most people could not understand the Latin version of the Bible, he translated it into the local language and he made a catechism - a summary of the principles of the Christian religion used for religious instruction - for the children to learn. He wanted the State to make parents send their children to school.

However, Luther's idea of primary education was narrow. It was an education only for religion, as there had been before the Renaissance. The school was still a servant of the church. Luther did not like the idea of learning for its own sake.

Melancthon was a friend of Luther's but he had different ideas about education. He published schoolbooks including Greek and Latin grammars. He started schools which were religious (Protestant) as well as Classical. They were very successful and prevented the spirit of the Renaissance being lost in the educational ideas of the Reformation.

The New Scientific Spirit

People now began to question the classical education provided in schools. They thought that the writings of the ancient Greeks could not be the only source of wisdom.

A new idea came about: Truth could be found through living, not in books; People should learn from Nature; Only ideas which develop from first hand experience are valid. Words often make us unable to see the truth. Classical education made people more worried about the form than the content of their writing, making people able to say nothing at all but to say it well.

People now wanted to connect education with the real world since everything we know, we know through our senses.

The Enlightenment (A European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries, emphasising reason and individualism rather than tradition)

The human intellect led to great achievements as a result of the new scientific spirit. The accomplishments of people like Galileo, Descartes and Newton meant that people began to think differently. People began to think reason was the final test of truth. Nature and Reason guided people's thinking. People began to think in a utilitarian way, putting importance on what is useful and practical.

Pietism (A 17th century movement for the revival of piety, or the quality of being religious, in the Lutheran Church)

The Pietists were not interested in culture and the fine arts and believed that religion was a matter of the heart and not of the head. They strove for simplicity in their worship and for a life without luxury, in which they worked for the service of fellow humans. Affiliation to a particular Christian church was unimportant to them; to them it was essential to live in small communities and have love for each other.

The Enlightenment meant that this religious movement in education in Germany became utilitarian (useful and practical). Francke, a leader of Pietism, introduced a free school for the poor, an orphan school, a school for the children of the townspeople, a middle school, a higher school, a girls' high school and a training college. In addition he started a school for the sons of country gentlemen and merchants who did not plan to go on to university. In this school they learnt subjects specifically suited to their future careers.

Rousseau (1712-78), the author of 'Emile' and 'The Social Contract'

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a Swiss (French-speaking) philosopher and writer. Through his writings, he was one of the most powerful influences of the pre-revolutionary period. The Paris Parliament condemned him and the Government of Geneva followed its example and also condemned him. However the people supported him.

'Emile' by Rousseau (published 1762)

Rousseau's Emile is an orphan who is given a 'natural' education. Emile is taught nothing until he feels the need to be taught it. There is no hurry to teach him anything. He has no books and is not to be taught to read or write until he is at least twelve, and only then if he wants to learn. Things are his teachers. Thus Emile does not learn science, he discovers it.

The tutor is with Emile all the time. He must create the environment for Emile's education, making sure that Emile is put in situations where he can learn.

Rousseau's book 'Emile' made people become very interested in education. It taught people to think of education from the child's point of view and to think of the child as a child rather than as an adult.

Despite these enlightened ideas, Rousseau thought that education was only necessary for the upper classes.

'Contrat Social' - The Social Contract' by Rousseau (published 1762)

A society, community or state is a group formed by individuals. In an ideal society, these individuals voluntarily follow the rules of the society and do their best for the welfare of the society. In return, the society does its best for the welfare of each individual who is its member. This agreement between the society and the individual is the Social Contract. In return for obeying the rules and working towards the society's welfare, each individual can give his or her opinion on what is good for the society and what rules the society should make.

'The Social Contract' was a great influence on the French Revolution and on many progressive Swiss readers. The book was, however, seen by many as a threat to the existing system, and a copy was burnt in public with the blessing of the government of Geneva.

De la Chalotais' Essay on National Education (1763)

De la Chalotais argued that education should be controlled by the state and not by the Church. This resulted in the state taking control of education in most European countries.

However, De la Chalotais also believed that education was only for the upper classes.

Philanthropy (the love of humankind) (A movement which sort to promote the general welfare)

The Philanthropists – people who wanted to improve the lives of others - were inspired by Rousseau. Basedow was a philanthropist who wanted to reform educational institutions throughout Europe. In Germany in 1774 he opened the 'Philanthropium' – so called because he wanted to educate the 'friends of humanity' in it.

In the 'Philanthropium' the principles of the Enlightenment were applied to education. There was no catechism (a summary of the principles of the Christian religion used for religious instruction). All forms of religion were tolerated but only the principles of natural religion were taught. Reason was applied in the teaching of all subjects. The aims of the school were utilitarian. Children were taught what would be most useful to them later in life. Teaching was done from direct experience.

Discipline was gentle. There were lots of games and outdoor activities because the health of the body was considered very important. However, education was still only for the upper classes.

Many schools in Germany and Switzerland followed the model of the 'Philanthropium'.

The French Revolution (The overthrow of the French Monarchy, 1789-99)

The ideas that inspired the French Revolution were important in bringing a climate of change to Europe. The Revolution demanded liberty and equality for every individual. It called for the free investigation of facts, free thought and free speech. It brought a culture of reason and intelligence and it supported the natural claims of every individual to justice and education. The ideas of the Revolution lived on.

An interest in education as a social issue

In the second half of the eighteenth century the idea of providing education for everyone was much discussed in Switzerland. The study of social problems became a fashion. Many societies and journals discussed social and moral problems, including of course education.

Behind the interest in education was the motive of philanthropy – love of mankind. Ideas about social reform were based on the rights of man. In Switzerland, education was seen as a very important part of the programme for social improvement.

In towns like Zurich, some practical reforms were made in schools. However Switzerland was not a unity, but a confederation of eighteen sovereign states and twenty-seven semi-independent states. Meanwhile the Swiss peasantry were more or less serfs. These facts combined to mean that large-scale educational reforms could not be carried out. Some members of the ruling classes did show a practical and philanthropic interest and tried to improve things for those dependent on them.

The Swiss Revolution of 1798 led to the break up of the Swiss confederation and a more democratic situation. Stapfer, the Minister of Arts and Science, tried to improve education for the people and supported the work of Pestalozzi. However, little changed and the state of education continued to be poor.

Sources

Green, J.A. (1912) Life and Work of Pestalozzi London: W.B. Clive, University Tutorial Press