

Development of Education, Upbringing, And Pedagogical Thought in Primary Classes from the 17th Century to The First Half of the 20th Century

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Abstract: The article traces the long-term evolution of primary-school education from the advent of early modernity to the threshold of contemporary pedagogy. Drawing on published sources, archival materials, and comparative historiography, the study reconstructs how social change, philosophical currents, and institutional reforms reshaped the aims, content, and methods of elementary teaching. It shows that the transition from confessional schooling to Enlightenment rationalism, and later to the child-centered paradigms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, transformed the teacher's professional identity and recast the place of upbringing in the curricular whole. Particular attention is paid to the circulation of ideas across Europe, the Russian Empire, and the United States, revealing networks of influence that prepared the ground for modern universal primary education. The findings illuminate continuities and ruptures in didactic theory, underline the role of socio-economic factors, and illustrate how early initiatives anticipated later global norms.

Keywords: History of pedagogy; primary education; upbringing; didactics; Enlightenment; progressive education.

Introduction: The seventeenth century marked a decisive moment in the history of European schooling. Confessional imperatives, civic anxieties, and mercantile aspirations collectively encouraged governments and religious orders to expand literacy among the young. Johann Amos Comenius articulated a universalist ideal in *Didactica Magna*, proposing that every child, regardless of estate or gender, could be guided toward wisdom through structured, age-

appropriate instruction. This claim challenged traditional exclusivity and provided an intellectual scaffold for subsequent reforms.

By the early eighteenth century the Enlightenment valorised reason and empirical inquiry, inspiring educational thinkers such as John Locke to foreground experience and habit in character formation. In parallel, emerging nation-states began to perceive primary schools as instruments for moulding

industrious, loyal citizens. These ambitions intensified during the Industrial Revolution, when the demands of factory production aligned with philanthropic campaigns to eradicate ignorance. The Lancaster and Bell monitorial systems, for all their mechanical rigidity, promised rapid expansion of schooling at minimal cost and evoked fierce debates over discipline, moral guidance, and instructional efficiency.

Nineteenth-century romanticism reacted against such utilitarianism. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's holistic vision integrated hand, heart, and head, while Friedrich Fröbel's kindergarten concept reimagined early education as a nurturing continuum beginning in play. Across the Atlantic Horace Mann's common-school movement welded Protestant ethics to republican citizenship, foreshadowing compulsory attendance legislation. Meanwhile, in Russia, Konstantin Ushinsky synthesized Western methodologies with indigenous traditions, stressing the native language as a medium of moral development.

The opening decades of the twentieth century witnessed a convergence of progressive ideas. Maria Montessori championed self-directed activity, John Dewey framed the classroom as a miniature democracy, and Anton Makarenko, in the wake of revolution, sought to harmonize collective upbringing with productive labor. Each of these figures contested the passive reception of knowledge, arguing instead for environments that cultivated autonomy and social responsibility. Investigating this four-hundred-year trajectory clarifies how diverse contexts produced overlapping yet distinct visions of the educated child.

The study employs a qualitative historical methodology grounded in three complementary approaches. First, a systematic review of primary sources—including pedagogical treatises, legislative statutes, school regulations, and contemporaneous periodicals—provides direct insight into prevailing theories and classroom practices. Documents were selected from major European languages as well as Russian, enabling cross-cultural comparison. Second, the research engages in contextual analysis, situating educational texts within their socio-economic and political milieus to discern drivers of continuity and change. Third, a historiographical synthesis integrates findings from modern scholarship, allowing the juxtaposition of classic narratives with recent reinterpretations that emphasise transnational flows of ideas.

Source criticism underpinned each stage. Texts were examined for authorial intent, audience, and rhetorical strategy; legal acts were cross-referenced with administrative archives to assess implementation; and missionary reports were contrasted with enrolment

statistics to gauge on-the-ground realities. Where quantitative data proved fragmentary, triangulation with memoirs and inspectors' diaries offered qualitative corroboration. The chronological frame of 1600–1950 guided the sampling process, ensuring representation of pre-Enlightenment, Enlightenment, industrial, and progressive eras.

The analysis confirms that conceptions of the primary school evolved in tandem with shifting notions of childhood, citizenship, and labor. During the seventeenth century confessional schools prioritized catechetical memorization to secure doctrinal conformity. Instruction remained predominantly oral, textbooks scarce, and corporal punishment customary. Yet Comenius's advocacy of graduated curricula began to disseminate via Protestant networks, fostering incremental standardization.

By the mid-eighteenth century secular rulers, notably in Prussia and Austria, institutionalized teacher seminaries and mandated schooling as a means of administrative rationalization. The General-landschulreglement of 1763 exemplified the entwinement of statecraft and pedagogy; it prescribed subjects, teacher qualifications, and inspection regimes, signaling a decisive shift from clerical to bureaucratic oversight. Parallel developments in France underscored the tension between universalist rhetoric and fiscal limitations, as parish schools struggled to accommodate burgeoning populations.

Industrialization altered both the purpose and texture of instruction. Factory legislation that restricted child labor inadvertently bolstered attendance rates, while philanthropists financed charity schools to mitigate urban poverty. Nevertheless, classroom organization remained stratified until the diffusion of graded systems allowed age-homogeneous grouping and facilitated subject specialization. This innovation dovetailed with advances in print technology, which reduced textbook costs and widened curricular horizons beyond religious instruction to include arithmetic, geography, and rudimentary science.

The late nineteenth century introduced psychological insights into pedagogy. Experimental research on sensation and memory influenced lesson planning, and normal schools incorporated rudimentary psychology courses. Pestalozzian object lessons proliferated, encouraging sensory engagement with concrete materials. Fröbel's kindergartens provided a preparatory layer that softened the transition into formal schooling, emphasising rhythm, song, and manipulative play as vehicles for cognitive and moral growth.

Between 1900 and 1950 progressive reform reached its

zenith. In Italy, Montessori's Casa dei Bambini unveiled didactic apparatus calibrated to sensitive periods of development, dramatically reducing teacher-centered exposition. Dewey's laboratory school at the University of Chicago modelled inquiry-based learning, linking academic content to real-life problem solving. In post-revolutionary Russia, Narkompros attempted to fuse polytechnic education with collective agriculture, though political exigencies often overrode pedagogical experimentation. Meanwhile, the League of Nations endorsed comparative studies, catalysing the exchange of inspection reports and teacher-training curricula and thereby accelerating international harmonization of primary education standards.

The findings underscore that the trajectory of primary education was neither linear nor uniformly progressive; instead, it reflected dynamic negotiations among ideological imperatives, material constraints, and scientific discoveries. Confessional schooling anchored literacy in salvation, but its emphasis on rote learning cultivated a foundational skillset that later secular regimes could repurpose for civic ends. Enlightenment rationalism enriched curricular content, though the persistence of class hierarchies limited universal access until industrial capitalism required a broadly literate workforce.

The nineteenth-century synthesis of romantic humanitarianism and burgeoning psychology reframed the child as an autonomous moral agent, legitimising educational approaches that valued intrinsic motivation over external compulsion. Pestalozzi's and Fröbel's insistence on affectionate guidance anticipated contemporary socio-emotional learning frameworks, confirming the durability of their insights. Nevertheless, the diffusion of these ideas depended heavily on teacher preparation and state expenditure, variables that produced significant regional disparities.

Progressive education in the early twentieth century challenged the efficiency model inherited from monitorial practice. By foregrounding experiential learning, Montessori and Dewey advanced a theory of knowledge as active construction. Their experiments resonated with socio-political movements advocating democratic participation and women's emancipation, illustrating the reciprocal influence between pedagogical innovation and broader cultural transformations. In contrast, authoritarian regimes selectively appropriated progressive techniques—such as project work—while subordinating them to ideological indoctrination, a reminder of the vulnerability of educational ideals to political instrumentalisation.

The study's transnational perspective reveals that

pedagogical thought circulated through translations, study tours, and international congresses, creating a cosmopolitan dialogue that transcended borders. Ushinsky's adaptation of Western didactics to Russian conditions demonstrates the creative hybridity that characterized many national systems. Likewise, American reformers borrowed liberally from European precedents, yet localized them within township governance structures. Such patterns suggest that the development of primary education was a global enterprise, albeit one refracted through local priorities and constraints.

CONCLUSION

Over three and a half centuries the primary school evolved from an ecclesiastical outpost into a pivotal civic institution tasked with cultivating literate, responsible citizens. This transformation was propelled by philosophical re-imaginings of childhood, economic imperatives demanding skilled labor, and scientific advances that deepened understanding of learning processes. While methods and organizational forms diversified, the enduring quest to harmonize knowledge transmission with holistic upbringing remained a central theme. Contemporary primary education continues to grapple with this legacy, balancing accountability with creativity and equity with excellence. Understanding its historical foundations equips educators and policymakers to navigate current challenges with a richer sense of possibility and caution.

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