

How children learn

Educational theories and approaches – from Comenius the father of modern education to giants such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Malaguzzi

by Linda Pound

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Introduction

This book is an attempt to explain educational and psychological theories about how children learn. It provides food for thought for reflective practitioners, encouraging you to pause and reconsider why you do what you do.

Theories can be rooted in research and experimentation or they may be philosophical and hypothetical. Whatever their basis, the importance of observation is a common strand in the work of many theorists who were interested in finding out how children learn. Some were academics who became interested in children – others were experienced in working with children and developed theories to help them understand their experience. What is interesting is how often ideas which were based purely on observation are now supported by developmental theory.

We have singled out some of the key figures involved with theories about learning, particularly in the early years of education. In some cases these are linked to wider movements. Sigmund Freud, for example, is probably the best known psychoanalyst. However, other figures with psychoanalytical backgrounds who have perhaps had greater influence in education have also been included.

It is not clear why some names are remembered and others are not. Sigmund Freud is probably the best known psychoanalyst in this country, but in the United States Erikson and Fromm are more influential, perhaps because Freud fled from the Nazis to England, while Erikson and Fromm went to America.



Interaction with nature was a common strand in the thinking of the early theorist

Howard Gardner^[1] says that 'great psychologists put forward complex and intricate theories, but they are often remembered best for a striking demonstration. The founding behaviourist, Ivan Pavlov, showed that dogs can be conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell. The founding psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, demonstrated that unconscious wishes – for example sexual satisfaction – are reflected in ordinary dreams or slips of the tongue. And Jean Piaget (1896–1980), the most important student of intellectual development, showed that young children are not able to conserve quantities, such as liquids.' This is something to think about as you read.

About this book

- To create a sense of the way in which ideas have developed and evolved, the theorists are taken in chronological order. Where a section focuses on an individual this is according to their date of birth. This does not work in every case – Piaget and Vygotsky, for example, were contemporaries but Vygotsky's work was not widely known until some time after his death.
- Towards the end of the book you will find sections relating not to individual or groups of theorists but to broader ideas. Two of these sections relate to approaches which have no clearly identifiable leading theorist. Te Whāriki was developed in New Zealand as a government initiative, with groups of academics and practitioners including Margaret Carr and Helen May. Forest schools are widely regarded as having arisen from practice in Scandinavia but as the section on forest school shows there is a longer history. The three remaining sections focus on areas of interest to early childhood practitioners namely learning through play; research into brain development and emotional intelligence.
- Each section follows a similar format, beginning with some historical background and biographical details, where relevant, to place the person or topic in context. Significant dates are listed at the beginning of each section. The theory is explained and the titles of some of the books or articles they have written are listed. The influence that each theory has had and the criticisms which it has received are examined. Some of the specialist terms used in relation to a particular theory or topic are included in a glossary and each section includes some points for reflection to help you to apply the theory or approach to your own experience.
- There is also an attempt to link the theory with practice and to indicate what practice based on a particular theory would look like. Much of the practice you will see or read about has key features which appear similar. The importance of observing children is emphasised within all approaches. Outdoor experience is a common theme and the link with nature was a vital element of all the pioneer thinking about early childhood education, permeating much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century writing and thinking. In the twentieth century Margaret McMillan and Susan Isaacs did much to promote outdoor play and in the twenty-first century forest schools continue to focus on the importance of nature.
- You will find many other strands and connections as you read. Margaret Donaldson, for example, spent time with Piaget and Bruner. Pestalozzi was influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and in turn influenced Robert Owen and Friedrich Froebel. Links with other theorists are highlighted in each section.

Overall this book can only serve as an introduction to the fascinating history and development of early childhood care and education. We hope that it will encourage you to delve deeper, helping you to understand and reflect on how you work with young children.



The child is at the centre of the learning process

NOTE TO STUDENTS

Every effort has been made to make sure that you have the information you will need to cite sources in your essays and projects. You may need to rearrange these references in your written work to meet the demands of your tutors or courses. Double check before you hand in work that you have met the relevant requirements. At the end of the book you will find information relating to each section giving references and suggestions for further reading. Remember that the information in this book is by no means the end of the story. There is much more to be read and learned from the remarkable figures outlined here. Many of the books mentioned are no longer in print, so check to see if your library can get a copy. Some of these books are available in full or part text on the internet.

A word of caution about websites: some contain excellent information, others are worthless. Always think about who has published the information and why. Any website addresses provided were valid at the time of going to press.

1 Gardner (1996) *Intelligence: Multiple Perspectives*, Rinehart and Winston, Holt (page 97).

John Comenius

PROFILE

Born in the late sixteenth century, John Comenius has been called the father of modern education. His thinking and philosophy have had a strong influence on the way in which we view learning today.

KEY DATES

1592	Born in Moravia, now part of the Czech Republic, as Jan Komensky
1638	Invited to restructure the Swedish school system
1658	Publishes one of the first illustrated books for children, <i>The Visible World in Pictures</i>
1670	Dies in Amsterdam

LINKS

[Pestalozzi](#)
[Piaget](#)

His life

Jan Amos Komensky was born in Moravia in 1592, around the same time as the scientist, Galileo, the painter, Rembrandt and the writer, Milton. These three were significant figures at the beginning of a period known as the Age of Reason when thinking was characterised by people with enquiring minds who wanted evidence for arguments and often rejected traditional religious beliefs.

Comenius – as Komensky became known in a Latinised version of his name – was educated at the University of Heidelberg before becoming a bishop in the Moravian Church. It is thought that he was approached to become the first president of Harvard University, which was established in 1636, but declined because of the Church's troubles at that time.

In 1638 he was approached to restructure the Swedish school system – a role he took up in 1642. He was also invited to become a member of an English commission for the reform of education. Although he came to England, the Civil War made progress impossible and he left for Sweden. He died in Amsterdam in 1670 but after his death, his grandson became a bishop and presided over the renewal of the Church.

His writing

Comenius wrote more than 150 books, mostly on philosophy and theology. He wrote a novel called *The Labyrinth of the World*,^[1] which has been likened to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1631, he published a book called *The Gate of Tongues Unlocked* which was designed to help children learn Latin through their first language. This was a significant shift from the normal approaches to learning Latin used at that time. He developed this approach further with the publication, in 1658, of one of the first picture books for children, *The Visible World in Pictures*. It consisted of illustrations labelled in both Latin and the child's home language. It was translated into English in 1659.

His theory

Comenius believed that education begins in early childhood and should continue throughout life. He recommended sensory experiences rather than rote learning and was in favour of formal educational opportunities for women – an unusual idea in the seventeenth century. He established a branch of philosophy that he called pansophism, which literally means ‘all knowledge’. He believed that knowledge or learning, spirituality and emotional development were inseparable – a holistic view of education.

Putting the theory into practice

Comenius had high ideals and talked of developing schooling through play. There were few if any precursors to this in the seventeenth century. His emphasis on the senses was largely implemented through introducing illustrations to books. However, this was a radical step at the time. Education for girls and for the disabled were central to his belief about education. He wrote in 1657 that “the slower and weaker the disposition of any man, the more he needs assistance.... Nor can any man be found whose intellect is so weak that it cannot be improved”.[2]

Of girls he wrote that “they are endowed with equal sharpness of mind and capacity for knowledge... and they are able to attain the highest positions... (in) the study of medicine and other things which benefit the human race”.[3] He also believed, perhaps uniquely at that time, that a system of education should begin with the very young. Perhaps these are the reasons that he has been referred to as the “father of modern education”.[4]

What does practice look like?

After so many centuries, it is difficult to know exactly what a classroom designed by Comenius would have looked like. We do however know that although illustrated books for children and teaching in a child’s first language may seem like common sense today at that time his views were considered radical and exciting. Why else would he be invited to develop education in America, Sweden, Hungary and England?

Comenius favoured inclusive practice involving everyone, and teaching that encouraged learners to use their senses. He discouraged rote learning that would have been the more usual approach in the seventeenth century.

Above all he would encourage teachers to take account both of children’s developmental needs as learners as well as their individuality. Milestones and patterns of development had not been formally established at that time. In arguing for the unique needs of individual children Comenius would be relying on his own observation and insight into children’s learning.

Perhaps above all, Comenius’ practice was characterised by kindness. He wrote that adults should “teach gently”[5] ensuring that the experience of education was pleasurable for adults and children.

His influence

Comenius’ theories paved the way for subsequent developments in education. To us in the twenty first century it is perhaps unthinkable that attempts would be made to teach young children in Latin but Comenius was amongst those whose work changed ideas, highlighting the importance of a child’s first language. The fact that so many nations sought his advice has earned him the title of “teacher of nations”.[6] His understanding of the importance of learning through the senses and of the holistic nature of learning remain cornerstones of educational theories today.

Piaget[7] wrote of his influence and argued that we must be careful not to jump too quickly to the idea that writing for centuries before has shaped current understanding. However, in the case of Comenius, Piaget suggests, it is difficult not to believe that later theories were built around his innovative ideas.

Common criticisms of his theory

Despite his international reputation in his lifetime, there would have been many people ready to criticise Comenius' work and philosophy. Some criticisms would have come from those holding conflicting religious views. There would also have been those who regarded the education of girls or the use of the home language as entirely unacceptable.

Although Comenius' work was forward looking, it was a long way from what is now seen as learner-centred education. His idea of holistic education included the spiritual aspects of development and emotions but not physical development.



Comenius was amongst the first to devise picture books for children

GLOSSARY

Pansophism: a philosophy put forward by Comenius. It literally means all knowledge but the implication is that all knowledge should be open to everyone.

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- Why do you think physical development was not seen as part of a holistic approach to education by Comenius?
- Try to imagine what early childhood practice would look like if it catered only for the sons of rich parents, relied on rote learning and was given in Latin without picture books. Think too about how Comenius' ideas might have been received by his contemporaries.

- What in your view are the implications of Comenius' statement that there is no one who cannot benefit from education?

1 www.comeniusfoundation.org/comenius.htm

2 Comenius, J. (1896) *The Great Didactic*, Adam and Charles Black, London (first published in 1657).

3 Comenius, J. (1896) *The Great Didactic*, Adam and Charles Black, London (first published in 1657).

4 Cited in Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

5 Cited in Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

6 Cited in Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

7 Piaget, J. (1957) 'Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670)' in *Prospects* vol. XXIII no.1/2 1993 pp173–196, Unesco International Bureau of Education

(<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/comeniuse.PDF>).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

PROFILE

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a Swiss philosopher whose book, *Emile*, influenced child-rearing practices in eighteenth century France. Rousseau's educational theories continued to influence theorists and philosophers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

KEY DATES

1712	Born in Geneva, Switzerland
1740	Becomes a tutor in Lyon
1745	Begins a relationship with Therese Levasseur
1762	<i>Emile</i> is published
1778	Dies in Ermenonville, France

LINKS

[Pestalozzi](#)
[Froebel](#)

His life

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's mother died when he was just a few days old and he was brought up by his father and an aunt. At the age of 12 he was apprenticed to an engraver who treated him badly and when he was 16 he ran away. For the next ten years he travelled, staying in France and Italy. At 18, he decided to teach music, but gave up when he found he was only a little ahead of his pupils. His attempt to tutor two small boys in Lyon in 1740 lasted less than a year. It did, however, start him thinking about education.

In 1745, Rousseau began a relationship with Therese Levasseur, who was to bear him five children. All five were placed in an orphanage soon after their birth, it is said against their mother's wishes. It is also said that Rousseau came to regret this action later.^[1] Rousseau wrote a number of books, but it was one called *Emile* that earned him a name in France. Parents claimed to be bringing up their children a la Jean-Jacques – which involved not having a wet nurse, being bathed in cold water and being flimsily dressed – to be closer to nature. After his death, in 1778, crowds paid homage to him at his burial place.

His writing

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote a mixture of novels and non-fiction books on music, philosophy and politics. *Emile* – his book on education – is a mixture of fiction and philosophy. He also wrote a book called *The Social Contract*. (Both are published by Penguin.)

His theory

Rousseau described children as noble savages. He believed that we are born essentially good and are part of nature. Nature made children to be loved and helped but because they are innocent this help should not be intrusive. He wrote that adults should let children be children and reverse childhood. He also believed in fostering self-reliance.

He suggested three broad stages of development. The first, up to 12 years of age, he saw as a stage when children were animal like. The second from 12 to 16 years of age represented the beginning of rational thought, while from 16 onwards adulthood began.

Rousseau thought that governments should work to establish freedom, equality and justice. Their role was not just to allow the will of the majority to hold sway but to take on the task of ensuring that everyone, including the weak, was protected. Education would support this process by cultivating the good in people. We should all be educated for our own good, not for that of society which, Rousseau said, was corrupt.

Putting the theory into practice

Rousseau never put his theories into practice – indeed he sent his own children to live in orphanages. However, many parents in eighteenth century France were influenced by Rousseau's writing. Until then, among members of French society it was accepted practice to place babies with wet nurses and swaddle them for their early months. This changed and the changes were largely attributed to Rousseau. Other writers and thinkers condemned some of the practices adopted.

Rousseau believed in freedom. He wrote, for example^[2] that 'the only habit the child should be allowed is that of having no habits... Reverse the usual procedure and you will almost always do right'. Freedom (for boys) was to involve integration with nature. Development was driven by nature and, in his view, contact with society corrupted children. This is reflected in his famous words written in 1762^[3] that "Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains". Emile, the subject of Rousseau's famous book of the same name, is depicted as growing up in the countryside where nature provided his education and taught him how to live in freedom.



Freedom involved integration with nature

His influence

Rousseau's immediate influence on eighteenth century Paris may not have been what he wished but over time, it can be seen that his influence has been great. While many of Rousseau's theories appear far-fetched, he enabled people to think differently about the way in which children should be educated. His overwhelming contribution to education has more to do with freeing up thinking,

encouraging people to consider and try new ideas. In 1788, after Rousseau's death, Madame de Staël, an eighteenth century writer and society figure, claimed that he 'had succeeded in restoring happiness to childhood'.^[4]

His emphasis on the role of nature in education has had a very long-term influence, beginning with the work of Pestalozzi, who in turn influenced Froebel. We might say that this focus continues to influence thinking about the education of young children through forest schools and through the overall emphasis on the importance, for both physical and emotional well-being, of outdoor play.

In highlighting the importance of observation, Rousseau has influenced the development of early childhood education. In advocating that teachers take time to notice what and how children are learning he helped to shift the focus of education away from what was being taught to what was being learnt.

Common criticisms of his theory

The definitions which Rousseau uses in his writing make it difficult to follow exactly what he means. He says repeatedly, for example, that 'the first impulses of nature are always right'.^[5] However, he supports this claim by asserting that behaviour that is not inherently good cannot be natural. By this reasoning, any bad or evil actions are not part of nature.

His belief in the importance of freedom is supported by arguing that if a person does not feel constrained, then their liberty is not infringed. For Rousseau, 'Man feels free when he wants only what is within his reach'.^[6] In other words, self-discipline is the only true freedom. The main criticism of his work is that his ideas were not practical and were open to misinterpretation.

Rousseau has also been criticised for the fact that his philosophy was to be applied only to boys. For girls, obedience was considered to be of prime importance.

What does practice look like?

It is difficult to say what practice would have looked like since as Rousseau himself stated he was, in his writing, presenting "an ideal, not a reality; a philosophical position rather than a "true treatise on education".^[7] He emphasised freedom and kindness, opportunities to be at liberty amongst woods and flowers, growing up in a natural environment. However, his ideas were often put into practice in ways which appear neglectful. In a description of the children of Paris, who were apparently being raised 'à la Jean-Jacques',^[8] we see that while freedom included freedom from the swaddling clothes which restricted movement in infancy, it was also sometimes interpreted as letting children run about in light clothing even in bitter winter weather. There were moreover critics who claimed that in too many children 'hair straggles in a hideous and disgusting way... They are no longer checked but clamber on to you with their muddy feet. When you visit their parents they deafen you with their noise, and just when their father or mother is about to reply to you on some important matter, you see them choose instead to answer some childish question of their darling son or daughter.... It is Emile which is responsible for this provoking, obstinate, insolent, impudent, arrogant generation'.^[9]

The role of the teacher was primarily to observe. He said that teachers should 'take time to observe nature; watch your scholar well before you say a word to him; first leave the germ of his character free to show itself'.^[10] He even suggested that teachers 'must know how to waste time in order to save it'^[11] – indicating a preference for a relaxed, carefree learning environment.



“Watch your scholar well before you say a word to him.”

GLOSSARY

A la Jean-Jacques: a phrase used to describe an upbringing in what was believed to be the style advocated by Rousseau with an emphasis on freedom and nature

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- Rousseau’s work highlights the difficulties of an emphasis on liberty. Do you agree that self-discipline is the only true freedom? What do you think it means in educational terms?
- Rousseau emphasised observation as a means of understanding children’s nature. Think of some examples of observations which have helped you to understand their nature or characteristics. What do you think is meant by the idea that adults must waste time in order to save it?

1 Rousseau, J-J. (1974) *Emile*, Dent and Sons (comments are in the introduction to this edition of *Emile*, which was written by P.D. Jimack).

2 Rousseau, J-J. (1974) *Emile*, Dent and Sons (comments are in the introduction to this edition of *Emile*, which was written by P.D. Jimack).

3 Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

4 Rousseau, J-J. (1974) *Emile*, Dent and Sons (comments are in the introduction to this edition of *Emile*, which was written by P.D. Jimack).

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7 Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

8 Rousseau, J-J. (1974) *Emile*, Dent and Sons (comments are in the introduction to this edition of *Emile*, which was written by P.D. Jimack).

9 Rousseau, J-J. (1974) *Emile*, Dent and Sons (comments are in the introduction to this edition of *Emile*, which was written by P.D. Jimack).

10 Rousseau, J-J. (1974) *Emile*, Dent and Sons (comments are in the introduction to this edition of *Emile*, which was written by P.D. Jimack).

11 Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

Johann Pestalozzi

PROFILE

Pestalozzi was a Swiss educator whose ideas and practices laid the foundation for the reform of nineteenth century education. He put forward radical ideas that were later taken up and have now been absorbed into the way we educate young children.

KEY DATES

1746	Born in Zurich, Switzerland
1770	Birth of son, named Jean-Jacques after Rousseau
1773	Opens experimental school
1799	Takes in war orphans at a school in Stans
1800	Directs educational establishment at Burgdorf
1801	<i>How Gertrude Teaches her Children</i> , the best known of Pestalozzi's books, is published
1805	Opens Yverdun Institute
1808	Works with Froebel
1818	Owen visits Yverdun
1827	Dies

LINKS

[Comenius](#)
[Rousseau](#)
[Owen](#)
[Froebel](#)



Children “should be taught by nature”

His life

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1746, the second of three surviving children. His father, a surgeon, died when Pestalozzi was five, leaving his mother to bring them up with the help of the family servant. Reports of his childhood differ – some claiming a happy childhood; others that his childhood was severely restricted – not allowed out to play and rarely joined by other children. Johann went to school and learned easily, though he was often thought of as socially inept and teased by other children. His philosophy later in life was to value idiosyncracies as “the greatest blessing of nature”.

During his childhood, Pestalozzi would visit his grandfather at Höngg, and there he became interested in the differences between country and townspeople. These experiences, together with the loyalty and devotion shown by his family’s servant, developed his respect for the poor. He thought that children in the country seemed contented. He also noticed that once they started school it seemed as though they lost their vitality. These insights were to influence his later theories and practice.

Pestalozzi undertook some study but grew tired of academic life and decided to study farming. He met and fell in love with Anna Schulthess, and bought a house and some neglected land at Neuhof near the River Aare. In 1769 he married Anna. In 1770, Pestalozzi and his wife had a son, Jean-Jacques, named after Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was a sickly child. Pestalozzi’s wife became seriously ill and the family was virtually destitute. Pestalozzi became a laughing stock in the town for his failures.

Five years later his farming enterprise failed but he remained interested in the poor and helping the

wider community and began taking children into his home. He taught them spinning, weaving, sewing and cooking. The idea was to teach the children to become self-supporting but this enterprise too failed. Eventually, after a further five years, the children were sent away. Despite all, Pestalozzi continued to believe that his ideas for the education of the poor were practical and well-founded.

After the French Revolution, Pestalozzi sought and gained government approval to set up a school in Stans for war orphans. He cared for them almost single-handedly and tried to restore their lives. He later said that these exhausting months in 1799 were the happiest of his life. At first there were 50 children but the numbers grew to 80. Pestalozzi commented on the scabies, open sores, ragged clothing, and overall physical plight of these children. Within five months, they were living together happily.

But the project took its toll on Pestalozzi's health and the school closed. Another was established in Burgdorf, where he stayed for a number of years but never lost the ambition to set up an industrial school for poor children. These years were invaluable in enabling Pestalozzi to formulate his educational theories.

But again Pestalozzi's grand plans failed and the institute closed. During its last year he wrote his great political work, *To the Innocence, the Earnestness and the Generosity of My Age and My Country*. Towards the end of his life, Pestalozzi wrote constantly about his ideas and theories. He died in 1827.



Children were encouraged to observe nature

His writing

In 1780, Pestalozzi started writing, setting out his theories of education. One of his most famous works, *Leonard and Gertrude*, was an instant success. It was the first realistic representation of rural life in that part of Europe. It told the story of a woman who exposed corruption and, by her well-ordered home, set a model for the village school and wider community.

For 30 years, Pestalozzi lived in virtual isolation writing about education, politics and economics. His most influential book remained *How Gertrude Teaches her Children*. It was about education and was published in 1801.

His theory

It has been suggested that Pestalozzi 'may fairly be regarded as the starting point of modern educational theory and practice'.^[1] He believed, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that education must be 'according to nature'. For Pestalozzi, however, security in the home was the foundation of happiness and, since it formed the basis of children's reality, was also the foundation for learning. Like Comenius, he believed that all children had an equal right to education and the capacity to profit from it. He attacked conventional education for being dull and too little concerned with interest and experience. Like Rousseau, he thought that children's innate faculties should be developed in accordance with nature. Children should be given real experiences and encouraged to engage with real things. Progress from the familiar to the new should be in a loving and secure environment.

Pestalozzi emphasised the unique nature of the individual and the inner dignity of everyone. He believed that every child has potential but that without love neither physical nor intellectual powers can develop naturally. He wrote that love, work and social interaction were the foundations of development.

Putting the theory into practice

Emphasising the importance of social interaction, Pestalozzi thought that children should be taught in groups according to their ability, not necessarily their age. The practical elements of his work owe something to [Comenius](#) in that he emphasised the importance of the senses and based learning on the familiar. Spelling and reading were practised with moveable letters, pebbles and beans, and even apples and cakes were used for sums and fractions. Only when mathematical ideas were fully understood, did Pestalozzi teach children numbers. This was a far cry from the conventional education of the early 1800s but very much in line with current thinking.

For Pestalozzi the most important sensory experience was observation. He led what were known as 'object lessons' and linked these to actions since, for him, action must follow perception. He argued that life shapes us and the life that shapes us is not a matter of words but actions – education involves the repetition of actions. He further suggested that schooling should not be about blind obedience or diligence in set tasks but in "interdependent action and fitness for life".^[2]

His influence

[Friedrich Froebel](#) and [Robert Owen](#) both spent time at Yverdon. Froebel in particular was heavily influenced by Pestalozzi's work. Both Owen and Froebel built on the link between childhood and the natural world, Rousseau's focus which was enhanced and made practical by Pestalozzi. Many of the phrases today associated with Froebel (such as 'learning by doing' and 'making the inner outer') were taken from Pestalozzi. Owen had some criticisms of Yverdon, yet he sent some of his sons to a school which had been set up by one of Pestalozzi's followers because he admired the belief that rich and poor should be educated in similar ways.

The tradition established by Pestalozzi and his wife of taking in underprivileged children has been perpetuated in the Pestalozzi Children's Villages. At the end of the Second World War, the Swiss humanist, Dr Walter Corti (1910–90), wanted to help orphaned and refugee children. He set up a village at Trogen in Switzerland in Pestalozzi's name. In 1957, a second Pestalozzi village was established in East Sussex, UK. Originally, the English school took children from the age of nine whose lives had been devastated by war. Then it helped children from other conflicts, before including Third World countries. Today there is worldwide work in a range of Pestalozzi Children's Villages.

Today his influence may be found in the emphasis on outdoor education. Like Comenius and Rousseau before him, his emphasis on the observation of children continues to be seen as a vital element of successful practice. The importance of a secure and loving environment which promotes social interaction is also an important legacy.

It is for these reasons that Pestalozzi is widely described as having created the starting point for modern educational practice.

What does practice look like?

In 1805 Pestalozzi opened a boarding school at Yverdon which became world famous and drew pupils from all over Europe. The school relied on fee-paying pupils but some poor children were taken in to satisfy Pestalozzi's lifelong wish to educate the poor. It had up to 250 pupils at any one time. His approach to education not only aimed to involve all classes, Pestalozzi also believed that girls should be educated together with boys. Children were given plenty of exercise in the fresh air, nourishing food, had ten lessons a day (starting at six in the morning), enjoyed swimming, tobogganing and long walks.

The institute attracted the attention of [Friedrich Froebel](#) because of its emphasis on outdoor pursuits such as gardening. [Robert Owen](#) visited Yverdon and for him the attraction was the school's focus on educating rich and poor together. He was also attracted by the school's focus on developing children's ability to live independently – through growing food, and learning manual skills.

Pestalozzi's approach had two parts – a general method and a special method.^[3] The general focused on the importance of a secure and loving environment while the special emphasised the importance of learning through first-hand experience and observation. Pestalozzi wrote in his diary^[4] that children should be “taught by nature rather than by you... should a bird sing or an insect hum on a leaf, at once stop your walk; bird and insect are teaching him; you may be silent.”



Education was based on the natural world

Common criticisms of his theory

Pestalozzi was not generally regarded as successful. The schools he established were not open for long. Owen believed that Yverdon was less successful than his school in New Lanark at providing children with life skills. Perhaps Pestalozzi's dream of providing a practical education fell down because he was not entirely practical himself (though certainly more practical than Rousseau that he so much admired). Although he built on many of Pestalozzi's theories, Froebel believed that Pestalozzi did not pay enough attention to physical involvement in learning. His occupations and activities were designed to address what he saw as a flaw in Pestalozzi's work.



Children were taught to be independent

GLOSSARY

Interdependence: reliance on others within a group, recognising that no one can truly operate independently, without affecting or being affected by others.

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you agree that education should focus on fitness for life? What do you do in your setting that supports this view?
- Pestalozzi appears to put more emphasis on children looking at things rather than handling them. Why do you think this might be? Are there any advantages?
- What elements of your practice aim to promote social interaction?

1 Green, J. A. and Collie, F. A. (1916) *Pestalozzi's Educational Writings*, Edward Arnold (quote from

page 1).

2 Pound, L. (2011) *Influencing Early Childhood Education*, Open University Press, Maidenhead (see page 3).

3 Joyce, R. (2012) *Outdoor learning: past and present*, Open University Press, Maidenhead (see Chapter 4).

4 Mayer, F. (1960) *A History of Educational Thought* (2nd ed), Charles Merrill Books Inc., Columbus OH.

Robert Owen

PROFILE

Robert Owen, a self-made Welsh businessman and internationally renowned philanthropist, set up the first workplace nursery in Britain at his cotton mills in New Lanark in Scotland. Many of his policies and ideas about communities and education were ahead of their time.

KEY DATES

1771	Born in Newtown, Wales
1815	Establishes factory in New Lanark
1816	New Lanark infant school opens, catering for children aged two to six
1818	Visits Pestalozzi at Yverdon
1825	Establishes New Harmony village in USA
1858	Dies in Newtown, his birthplace

LINKS

[Pestalozzi](#)



Singing and dancing were encouraged

His life

By the age of 7, Robert Owen had become a pupil-teacher and by the age of 9 had left school to work as a grocery boy. He subsequently worked in a saddler and as a postmaster. Having married the daughter of a mill-owner, in 1815, Robert Owen set up a new factory complex where cotton was manufactured in New Lanark in Scotland. Many of his workers were destitute refugees, evicted from the land clearance in the Highlands of Scotland. Owen believed he should provide for their welfare and built housing, social facilities and a school. He recognised the childcare problems which women workers faced and provided a nursery, known at that time as an infant school.

Owen was a businessman. He claimed that by catering for the needs of families and children his manufacturing profits rose. The workforce was happy and therefore productive. His focus on young children also promised continuing profitability. He also sought to engineer social change, hoping to replace the competitive and class-bound society of that period with one which was more socialist in outlook. Owen was opposed to child labour and the provision made for children at New Lanark had some influence in changing opinions. Although neither employers nor government showed much concern for the welfare of workers, Owen was instrumental in changing the law on child labour.

In 1825, Robert Owen went to America for a short time. He had bought a village and created a venture that he called New Harmony. His aim was to establish a 'community of equality' where people lived communally, ate together in the same place and wore similar clothes. Owen never lived there but some of his children did. The constitution included objectives^[1] which emphasised the importance of equality and freedom, including:

- equality of rights, uninfluenced by sex or condition, in all adults;
- equality of duties, modified by physical and mental conformation;
- co-operative union, in the business and amusements of life;
- community of property;
- freedom of speech and action;
- sincerity in all our proceedings;
- kindness in all our actions;
- courtesy in all our intercourse;
- order in all our arrangements;
- preservation of health;
- acquisition of knowledge;
- the practice of economy, or of producing and using the best of everything in the most beneficial manner;
- obedience to the laws of the country in which we live.

In both New Lanark and New Harmony radical ideas on the environment, concern for social well-being and a sense of community were seen as being connected to the education not just of young children but of adults as well. These ideas, still seen as aspirational today, must have seemed revolutionary during Owen's lifetime.



Owen believed that knowledge of geography would broaden children's horizons

His writing

Robert Owen wrote a vast number of political pamphlets and books. The website of the Robert Owen museum in Newtown, his birthplace, indicates that he wrote more than thirty publications. It identifies *A New View of Society* (published in 1812) as his major work. It also has his plan for the permanent relief of the working classes, which was published on behalf of the British and Foreign Philanthropic Society, 10 years later in 1822. In this he identifies the advantages for the poor of working in a rural mill such as he set up in New Lanark. He contrasts these with the fate of those living and working in the wretched towns and cities that had mushroomed as a result of the Industrial Revolution. In 1836 he published his autobiography which was entitled *The New Moral World*.

His theory

Owen believed that the experiences we offer young children have a lifelong impact on the way in which they develop. Two statements are important in understanding Robert Owen's educational theories.^[2]

They are:

'Man is a compound being, whose character is formed of his constitution or organisation at birth, and of the effects of external circumstances acting upon that organisation, which effects continue to operate upon and to influence him from birth to death...' and

'Nevertheless, the constitution of every infant, except in the case of organic disease, is capable of being formed or nurtured, either into a very inferior or a very superior being, according to the qualities of the external circumstances allowed to influence that constitution from birth.'

These statements demonstrate that unlike some earlier (and subsequent) theorists, Owen believed that children were shaped by both their genetic inheritance and by their lifelong experiences. To understand his theory it is necessary to understand that Owen was out of step with almost all of his contemporaries. Owen was a social reformer who lived by his own beliefs. In sending some of his

sons to a school run by a follower of Pestalozzi he demonstrated his commitment to the education of rich and poor in a similar way. He rejected religion apparently stating that “there is something wrong with all religions”.^[3]

In developing his theory Owen visited a number of experimental schools in Europe, including Pestalozzi’s school at Yverdon. The two men shared a belief in the importance of early education, of sensory experience and of the environment – although Owen is reported to have believed that New Lanark was better at ensuring that children had the skills with which to earn a living and at nurturing positive dispositions for learning.^[4]

Where Owen was in step with other radical thinkers of his time was in a growing belief, reflected in the ideas of Romantics such as Rousseau, that childhood was of great importance in shaping the child’s future and that childhood should be a happy time. If childhood innocence could be protected by adults, then Owen and others believed, there was hope for the future. Owen’s theory therefore was that if the children of the working class could be protected and given a decent life during childhood, then their future would be assured.

Putting the theory into practice

In order to put his theory into practice, Owen created at New Lanark a manufacturing environment which gave workers a decent environment. He paid better than average wages, provided housing and education for all, including working adults. Even more unusually, the school at New Lanark was an early attempt to provide group care and education for the very young children of working class parents, and is sometimes described as the first workplace nursery.

The principles underpinning practice included:

- a focus on geography. Owen’s socialist views encouraged him to look beyond Britain’s shores to Europe and beyond. In addition to the settlement in New Harmony, he argued for the establishment of new towns as far afield as Australia. Geography would broaden children’s horizons;
- a focus on equality. Although morality was very much part of a Victorian education, for Owen, this must include equality;
- fun, excitement, conversation and well-being. For Owen all these elements contributed to the happy childhood he sought for all children;
- physical well-being through outdoor provision, exercise, fresh air and nourishment.

What does practice look like?

His expectation was that this kindness would be imitated and that children would be kind to one another. His reminders to staff to show ‘unceasing kindness, in tone, look, word and action, to all the children without exception’^[5] reflect his genuine liking for children.

The schoolroom at New Lanark has been described^[6] as being ‘furnished with paintings, chiefly of animals, with maps, and often supplied with natural objects from the garden, fields and woods – the examination and explanation of which always excited their curiosity and created an animated conversation between the children and their instructors’.

He provided musicians and hired artists to paint murals. He even bought a baby alligator to stimulate interest in natural history and geography. Children stayed at school until the age of ten but classes were also provided for adults.

Children were encouraged to spend many hours each day in the open air and there was a strong emphasis on physical activity and music – singing, marching to music, fife playing and dancing. Dancing lessons began at the age of two and children became highly competent at, what a contemporary writer described as ‘all the dances of Europe’. This was said to be because Robert Owen had ‘discovered that dancing is one means of reforming vicious habits... by promoting

cheerfulness and contentment... thus diverting attention from things that are vile and degrading'.^[7] Books were considered inappropriate for young children. Geography had a 'strong moral undertone, for the children were often reminded that but for an accident of birth they might have been born into a different society with values totally unlike those of their own'.^[8] The emphasis was on morality, on respecting others and never acting in unkind ways.

His influence

Robert Owen has been described as 'one of the most important and controversial figures of his generation'^[9]. Moreover he has also been described as one of the first modern educators whose ideas about the treatment of those in poverty can be seen reflected in current ideas about a need for universal early years provision. The ideas that Owen developed in New Lanark were highly influential in changing attitudes about child labour. He was to be instrumental in changing employment law (Factory Act 1819) so that children under 10 could no longer work. The law also reduced working hours for children over ten years of age.

His commitment to education, not just for children but as a lifelong process, was also radical, as were his ideas about the importance of equality. It was his ideas that led to the formation of the Co-operative movement. His work is widely recognised in China.

The New Lanark nursery attracted many visitors and although it did not have much impact on provision for young children in England, it was influential in Scotland. In Glasgow, close to New Lanark, two similar schools (known at that time as infant schools and catering for children up to six years of age) were established. These have been said to have introduced the idea of free play before Froebel.^[10] The idea of combined nursery centres – offering both care and education – was taken up elsewhere in Europe (for example, the *écoles maternelles* which began in France in 1848) but sadly was not as well received in Britain.

Common criticisms of his theory

Education in England followed a more formal route. While government seemed anxious to get children into school early to prepare them for the world of work, Owen believed that the best preparation for the future was the development of respect, equality and cooperation. He has been described as "a lonely voice in an England convulsed with a search for power and quick wealth".^[11] It may be that his ideas came too soon, that they were simply too radical for most people.

Robert Owen's work has been criticised as being rooted in his desire for profit rather than genuine concern for the welfare of his workers and their families. However, his policies were a bold step forward and although he clearly had a good head for business it seems likely that in the climate of opinion at that time his basic motive was equality and fairness.

Owen has been criticised for admitting children from as young as one year of age to his nursery. Was it concern for children – or was it motivated by commercial profit? Or was it seen as an opportunity to get mothers back to work sooner? This area of criticism has been linked to an idea which has dogged nursery education. Van der Eyken writing in the 1960s argues that nursery education became associated with rescuing the poor from a life that is 'vile and degrading'^[12] that "it has made harder the task of convincing society as a whole that the early years of any child are too important to be left unattended".^[13] In other words nursery education was seen as only necessary for the children of the poor – not needed by more advantaged families. It seems unlikely given Owen's commitment to the integration of poor and rich and his concern for others that this was his view – merely the way in which it became interpreted by others.



Owen believed that childhood should be a happy time

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- Do you agree that happiness is important in early childhood? Give your reasons.
- Do you agree that singing and dancing are important? Give your reasons.
- Why is nursery education important for all children – not just the poor?

1 Donnachie, I. (2000) *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony*, Tuckwell Press.

2 Whitbread, N. (1972) *The Evolution of the Nursery-Infant School*, Routledge and Kegan Paul. (Whitbread cites Owen on page 14)

3 Nutbrown et al. (2008) *Early Childhood Education*, Sage, London.

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8 Donnachie, I. (2000) *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony*, Tuckwell Press.

9 Donnachie, I. (2000) *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony*, Tuckwell Press.

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Friedrich Froebel

PROFILE

Friedrich Froebel is widely associated with his words “play is a child’s work”. He saw childhood as part of nature, a time of life steeped in spirituality. His influence is seen today in the emphasis on play and outdoor provision in early childhood education. He is also credited with having pioneered child-centred approaches to learning.

KEY DATES

1782	Born in Thuringia, Prussia (now Germany)
1808	Teaches at Pestalozzi’s school in Switzerland
1816	Sets up own school in Griesheim
1818	Sets up school in Keilhau
1826	<i>The Education of Man</i> is published
1852	Dies
1854	Beginning of Froebelian training in England
1857	Froebelian training courses certificated by the Froebel Society for the Promotion of the Kindergarten System

LINKS

[Rousseau](#)
[Pestalozzi](#)
[McMillan](#)
[Athey](#)



The garden was a vital aspect of provision

His life

Friedrich Froebel was born in 1782 in Thuringia, now part of Germany. He was the son of a clergyman and the youngest of five children. His mother died when he was nine months old. When he was ten, he went to live with an uncle who took an interest in him and sent him to school. He enjoyed mathematics and languages but his great passion was nature, particularly plants.

After leaving school he became an apprentice forester. After two years he took some informal courses at Jena University where he developed an appetite for philosophy and a love of intellectual learning. He read widely and studied hard and was influenced by the thinkers of the day. He took a variety of jobs, including land surveyor, estate manager and secretary until his reading led him to an interest in teaching. He spent some time teaching at Pestalozzi's school in Yverdon. Froebel went to Frankfurt to study architecture but took up teaching after meeting Anton Gruner. Gruner ran what was seen as a progressive school in Frankfurt and he gave Froebel a job there.

After further study (interrupted in 1813 by military service during the Napoleonic Wars) at the University of Gottingen, Froebel set up his own school in Griesheim in Thuringia. He was 34. In 1818, he moved the school to Keilhau in Prussia and began to put his educational theories into practice. Influenced by both Rousseau and Pestalozzi, Froebel believed in child-centred education. He and the families friends with whom he set up the school established an educational community. This is reflected in his writings when he says 'Let us live with our children, let them live with us, so we shall gain through them what all of us need'.^[1] The school flourished.

At the request of the Swiss government he spent some time training teachers in Switzerland, and began work as head of a new orphanage school there. It was this job that sparked his deep interest