Pestalozzi

In this instalment of her series on groundbreaking thinkers in the early years, *Linda Pound* discusses Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi, the 'starting point of modern educational theory and practice'

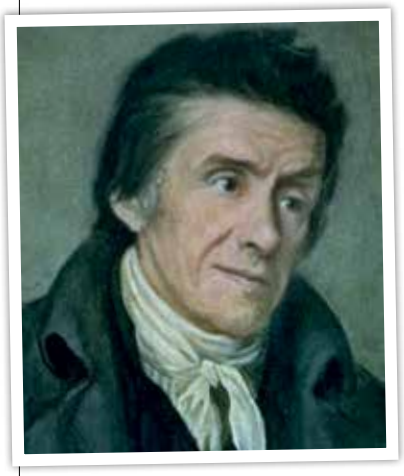

PHOTO AT CHELSEA OPEN AIR NURSERY AND CHILDREN'S CENTRE **TERI PENGILLEY**

Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was born in Zurich, the middle of three children. His father died when he was five years old and the children were brought up by their mother and a family servant. The servant had promised Pestalozzi's dying father that she would continue to support the family, and this she did until her own death 40 years later. Pestalozzi's view of the world was significantly shaped by the contrast between home life and holidays spent with his grandfather in the countryside, where many people lived in dire poverty.

Although he was academically able, the relative isolation of Pestalozzi's upbringing meant that he encountered difficulties at school, being teased by other children. Unhappy with academic life, Pestalozzi turned his hand to farming. He had been heavily influenced by the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose much-praised book *Emile* had been published when Pestalozzi was 16 years old. Rousseau's central philosophy focused on freedom, self-reliance and reverence for childhood as part of nature. So impressed with the work of Rousseau was he that Pestalozzi named his only son Jean-Jacques.

Driven by his early experience, Pestalozzi spent much of his life attempting to help poor children. In 1774, he created a home for orphans. In return for their keep and lessons in arithmetic and catechism, the children worked on the land and contributed to household chores. Around the time of the French Revolution, with the help of just one other person, Pestalozzi took on the care and education of 70 children displaced by war. He regarded this period as the happiest part of his life, but it was short-lived.

In 1800, Pestalozzi established an educational institute at Burgdorf, which enabled him to test out his dream of educating poor and privileged children side by side. It is, however, his school at Yverdon, in Neuchâtel, Switzerland for which he was most praised.

ACHIEVEMENTS

His name is widely associated with Pestalozzi Children's Villages, although the only connections with Pestalozzi himself are Switzerland and a commitment to disadvantaged children. After the Second World War, Walter Corti, a Swiss humanist, created a home for children of all nationalities who had been orphaned or become refugees as a result of war. The organisation still bears Pestalozzi's name and acknowledges its debt to his philosophy.

Pestalozzi favoured integrated education, including both girls and children with speech and hearing impairment in his educational ventures. Although seen as radical, Pestalozzi was simply building on the earlier ideas of Czech philosopher, pedagogue and theologian John Amos Comenius. The education Pestalozzi offered emphasised the importance of outdoor provision and, through observation, building on each child's interests and temperament.

The focus on nature and on self-reliance had an immense influence on many people interested in education. The Welsh social reformer Robert Owen visited Pestalozzi's school at Yverdon and subsequently sent some of his own children to a school in Switzerland that was run by a former colleague of Pestalozzi. Friedrich Froebel worked at Pestalozzi's school in Yverdon, where education was based on farming and sought to bring together privileged and disadvantaged children, an aim considered at that time unattainable and by many people undesirable. The importance of outdoor learning, of sensory involvement, and of learning by doing was what Froebel learnt from his time at Yverdon – lessons that have impacted all subsequent early childhood education.

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Pestalozzi spent a large portion of his life writing about education and politics. The book *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* is perhaps his most influential. His dream was to change the terrible lives of many children, but it is his combination of educational practice and writing that has led him to be described as 'the starting point of modern educational theory and practice' (Green and Collie 1916). He believed in the importance of professional practice and developed approaches for the education of both children and teachers.

EDUCATIONAL BELIEFS

Pestalozzi was successful in building on Rousseau's theories – taking abstract ideas and turning them into practice. His motivation was what he described as the 'bottomless swamp' of popular education in his time. He argued that in order to change things, to divert 'its foul waters', he needed to 'know the sources of its waters' and 'the causes of its obstructions' (Pestalozzi 1907). Pestalozzi, however, differed from Rousseau in some important matters. Rousseau and other members of the French Enlightenment movement focused on freeing the poor, but Pestalozzi aimed to help those living in poverty to help themselves through social reform, not social revolution.

After 30 years of thinking and studying, Pestalozzi came to believe that children's development should be based on the integration of head, heart and hands. Manual work, social

Extended outdoors activity was a vital element of Pestalozzi's approach to education

and emotional skills and sensory awareness should combine, enabling the learner to engage with the world around them.

The abstract nature of words and ideas had in Pestalozzi's view to be based on real experiences, drawing on all the senses. Albert Einstein attributed his success to his education at a school whose approach was based on Pestalozzi's ideas. He suggested that it helped him to understand the value of an education 'based on free action and personal responsibility', rather than 'outward authority' (Isaacson 2007).

Like Bronfenbrenner writing nearly 200 years later, Pestalozzi placed the child at the centre of the learning process, surrounded first by parents, then by the wider family and community. He believed that both poor and privileged children could learn from each other – something that he tried to put into practice. Ultimately, he believed that the child's learning and community are embedded and rooted in nature.

EDUCATION AT YVERDON

The school at Yverdon catered for up to 250 children. Children came from all over Europe, attracted by Pestalozzi's approach. Although initially catering just for boys from the age of seven to 15, gradually girls were included, and then children with speech and hearing impairment.

The school was fee-paying but, because Pestalozzi believed in educating poor children with those who led more privileged lives, some children who could not have afforded the fees were admitted. Two elements were identified as crucial to learning – a secure and loving environment, and learning through observing and experiencing the world.

There were ten lessons a day, starting at 6.00am. Much of the day was spent outdoors – swimming, tobogganing and walking. Healthy exercise, fresh air and nourishing food were seen as fundamental. Children were taught how to grow food and to develop a range of manual skills, such as weaving and cooking, so that they could learn to live independently.

Very unusually for his time, Pestalozzi believed that only when children had grasped basic concepts should they be introduced to numbers and letters. Learning to read involved moveable letters. Mathematics teaching made use of everyday materials – such as pebbles and beans for counting, and cakes and apples for teaching about fractions, addition and subtraction.

MORE INFORMATION

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- www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Heinrich-Pestalozzi
- Green JA and Collie FA (1916) *Pestalozzi's Educational Writings*. Edward Arnold
- Isaacson W (2007) *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. Simon & Schuster
- Pestalozzi J (1907) *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (4th ed). Swan, Sonnenschein & Co

- See www.pestalozzi.org.uk
- For our pioneers series, visit: www.nurseryworld.co.uk/early-years-pioneers

RELEVANCE TODAY

Based on his philosophy, Pestalozzi developed practices, many of which remain relevant today:

- Poverty impacts children's learning and life.
- Concrete experience must precede symbolism in order to develop abstract thought.
- Learning outdoors with and through nature is of fundamental importance.
- The curriculum should be learner-centred rather than subject-based.
- The teacher should offer help by participating with children in their chosen activity and strive to know the nature of each child in order to decide the details of the curriculum to be offered.
- Intellectual, moral and physical activities should be as one.
- There should be a strong emphasis on education in the home, family and community.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is ironic that Pestalozzi's approach to learning is often described as a method, since he believed that adherence to a particular method was unhelpful. In many ways, Pestalozzi's life was one of many disappointments. The farming enterprise established with his wife in the early years of their marriage failed. Attempts to help poor children to become self-supporting by learning to spin, weave, sew and cook were unsuccessful, and the children selected for his initial experiment were sent away after five years.

Robert Owen, despite sending some of his own children to the school of a colleague of Pestalozzi's, commented that he thought that his own school in New Lanark was more effective in enabling children to become independent and self-sufficient. Similarly, while Froebel learnt much from Pestalozzi, he believed that there was insufficient attention to physical development. For this reason, Froebel developed the gifts and occupations which continue to characterise Froebelian practice. ■