

# **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE SCHOOL AND SOCIAL LIFE: A RECURRENT QUEST IN PEDAGOGY**

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## **Introduction**

Political discourse in support of efforts to renew or, even, to radically reform education systems seek to bridge the gap between the school and social and professional life. This recurring question of the school-society relationship in educational conception strives to overcome the divide, or even the age-old rift, between the world of the school and the real world.

## **The meaning of traditional education**

Medieval education not only took place behind closed doors, i.e., the cloister, it was also designed to avoid any possible psychological and sociological influence from the social world, to keep students distanced from probable individual and collective encounters. Unlike education in antiquity, monastic education was based on a pessimistic conception of the nature of the child. Indeed, the child was “prone to evil because not yet very far from original sin.”<sup>1</sup> Monastic education was intended to produce a break from the family and social environment, which was suspected of nourishing evil within the family and the child. The traditional school, centred on knowledge exposure and transmission, was founded and built upon suspicion and defiance toward the world and resisted the social.<sup>2</sup> While the traditional school did also deliberately aim to prepare students for the social world, this preparation was seen as indispensable and a prerequisite passage to life in society. The traditional school prepared students for social and professional life. However, it was the exclusive context for education and the only setting of knowledge transmission.

The school, cloistered from life and carefully watching the world from a distance, looked down upon the useful and advocated a free culture based on the teaching of humanities. Certain disciplines were banned (such as French and science) because they were perceived as utilitarian, in other words as serving social and professional aims. Sometimes, they were considered to be the ‘tools’ of professions. They did not permit the construction of Reason. The 17th and 18th centuries reinforced this conception of a school at the service of a free culture. Introducing students to Latin and Greek, in addition to the sacred texts, marked this reinforcement of an accessible free culture its essentiality for entering social and professional life, by constructing their critical consciousness. The traditional school therefore remained a closed-off place where

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<sup>1</sup> Houssaye, Jean. *École et vie active, résister ou s'adapter*. (Neufchatel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1987), 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

students learned to define and implement a social and professional aim by mastering the intellectual tools needed to construct reasoning and judgment. It is worth noting that the traditional school was not pedagogy-based; subjects of study were presented to students following the principle of demonstration and imitation. But if the traditional school emerged in resistance to the social world, what can be said of the new school?

### **The boldness and nuance of the New School**

Starting in the 16th century, educational policies in France would strive to orchestrate an educational conception of a complementary, dialogical and fruitful relationship between school and life. The New School represented an expansion of educational space. Going beyond the immediate walls of the classroom, the new school promoted a protected social world that provided a context for students' first learning experiences. By advocating education in the countryside, as well as natural education, the new school valued nature as reflection of a new culture that was centred on children and their needs and interests. Progressive education sought to reconcile the individual with the school. It also aimed to give meaning to the knowledge learned by students in light of their personal interests. This education used a specific context, namely the natural world. It also involved a situation aimed at giving meaning to the knowledge to construct largely the work situation, It provided an education intended to meet the natural needs of the child.

In France, in particular, educational policy conceived an education system in which school-life links would by turns be closer and more distant<sup>3</sup>. The notion of *work* was emblematic of this broader dissonance in school-life relationships. The traditional school remained a school of meditation.<sup>4</sup> In the traditional school, the construction of the world was based on Reason. It was not founded on the experiences of human existence but rather on the reflections of the classical masters, who were to be understood through a process of imitation and impregnation. For the advocates of the traditional school, any element that might refer to the outside world, along with any occasion likely to distract students from this contemplation and meditation were to be banished<sup>5</sup>. Work, the cornerstone of social activity, embodied this risk of diverting contemplative activity towards a form of social activity.

Work also came to be held up as a value insofar as it constituted a bulwark against idleness. This question of the relationship to work was therefore a major social or even societal issue. To question one's relationship to work was also to question the place of work in modern societies. An effort was accordingly made to reflect upon the place of work. What was its added value? How could work serve a societal project characterized by ideological foundations and principles that promoted and reinforced

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<sup>3</sup> Houssaye, Jean. *École et vie active, résister ou s'adapter*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

the structure of social classes.<sup>6</sup> Was it possible to think about the relationship to work independent of the relationship between school and life? Otherwise put, how might the relationship to work be thought about in the context of conceiving an emancipatory education? Hence, seeing work as a central part of life likely meant inventing a different relationship to work by seeking to identify what, in work, might diminish or annihilate human freedom. It would mean detecting and revealing the premises of any patterns of submission and alienation. In this context, establishing work as a pedagogical pretext, rather than as a socio-economic aim, within any educational enterprise would give rise to a new dialogue between the utilitarian function and the emancipatory function of education.

### **How to reconcile school with life?**

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746 –1827) was a Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer. He founded several educational institutions in German and French-speaking regions of Switzerland and wrote many works explaining his principles of new education. Pestalozzi attempted to address these questions. His educational project involved an alternation between agricultural work and intellectual exercises. Here an obvious proximity can be seen between the valuing of manual work and advocacy of a return to nature, as a guarantee of human emancipation. Pestalozzi encouraged a detour by way of work. He extracted himself from the cloister imposed by the traditional school. For Pestalozzi, work was a necessary detour; in his view, however, the aim of education was still the emancipation of the child. Pestalozzi in particular, by admitting and accepting this impossible reconciliation between school and life, and by refusing an irreducible proximity between contemplation and work, accepted to entertain this dialogical or even dialectical tension between reflection and action. Pestalozzi suggested that such a tension should be seen as a gauge of the child's autonomy and emancipation. Without reflection, there could be no distance between oneself and one's actions, no questioning of its functionalist and productive aim, no casting off of its social contingencies. Without action, conversely, reflection would be fruitless and run the risk of making knowledge meaningless. Pestalozzi legitimized this relationship between school and life, or even this tension between instruction and socialization, based on an ideological posture that could be described as a critical consciousness. Action becomes possible only if reflection, drawing on Reason, might pave the way for a reflective approach to activity.

### **Work as pedagogy**

Pestalozzi did not boil the dimension of work down to mere productive activities aimed at ensuring the economic and social autonomy of their agents. Work would above all be a pedagogical pretext, perhaps even a pedagogical approach unto itself insofar as it illustrated and suggested opportunities for learning. This statement connects with and affirms an educational conception geared towards learning, that is,

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<sup>6</sup> Viennot, Éliane. *La France, les femmes et le pouvoir. Les résistances de la société, 17<sup>e</sup>-18<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Vol. 2. (Paris: Perrin, 2008).

towards elevating oneself and others<sup>7</sup>. While Pestalozzi remained convinced of the emancipatory value of education, he also considered this quest for liberation to be possible only through the creation, in educated subjects, of a reflective posture on their action. The action-reflection link is not reconciliation but, on the contrary, a dialectical tension between thought and action. The dynamic of this tension is indeed a reflective posture.

## **Conclusion**

Various permutations of the relationship between the school and life have taken shape through different ways of thinking about education systems in terms of their connections with what, both yesterday and today, constitute areas of proximity to the school, namely the school and the business. The New Education, like Pestalozzi and others thinkers conceived it, was not a technical education. It was not a school to learn “how to do”, but a school to understand why it is important to do. As educators, we have to remember this necessary link between thought and action to promote the emancipatory value of education.

## **Biography**

Philippe Maubant is professor at the University of Sherbrooke. He is director of the e-journal *Phronesis*. He co-hosts the International Network Observatory about professionalization. He teaches the foundations of education.

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<sup>7</sup> Reboul, Olivier. *Les valeurs de l'éducation*. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992).