

# Dewey's Educational Heritage: The Influence of Pestalozzi

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## **Introduction**

Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) is one of the most influential educational thinkers of the nineteenth century, exerting influence both internationally and in the U.S. Pestalozzi gained credibility with educators because of practical experience with and firsthand knowledge of schools and education. Abroad the Swiss educator's work influenced both the Prussian school system and pedagogical reformers Johann Herbart (1776–1841) and Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852). In the U.S. Pestalozzi's writings nurtured the work of early common-school movement leaders Horace Mann (1796–1859) and Henry Barnard (1811–1900). As Nakosteen observes (in his preface to Barlow, 1977), "Pestalozzi is unique in the fact that he tried out his educational doctrines experimentally in the Institutes which he built and financed" (p. 1). His experimental nature, not unlike that of Dewey, the prominent pedagogical reformer who followed Pestalozzi by about a century, is reflected in Pestalozzi espousing the benefits of a virtual "laboratory school," although he did not use the Deweyan term.

Despite earning renown for his pedagogical influence during the nineteenth century, little scholarship explores Pestalozzi's influence on educational thinkers who followed him. While it is no secret Dewey (1859–1952) was influenced by Pestalozzi, it is nevertheless difficult to find scholarly work that directly explores this connection. To remedy this lack, we trace some of the Pestalozzian ideas present in and critical to Dewey's educational thought. Pestalozzi and Dewey's work commonly endures through direct and indirect influences, particularly how educators through the years have sought pedagogically to engage students. We argue select themes of these educational thinkers—relating school to life, the idea of school as a community, the pedagogical power of concrete things and experiences, "universal" education, and student interest as a pedagogical building block—continue to hold promise to help a new generation of teachers better connect with students. As not all readers may be familiar with Pestalozzi's educational ideas and career,

we begin with a brief overview of his career and influence on nineteenth-century educational thought.

### **Pestalozzi's Influence on Early Mid-Nineteenth-Century Educational Thought**

Pestalozzi began his career as an educator in 1774. For Pestalozzi, education was a socializing and civilizing force that helped to prepare people for future roles in society. Inspired by Rousseau's *Emile* (1762/1979), Pestalozzi came to believe in the power of natural education. For Pestalozzi, a "natural" approach to education meant teachers should find ways of teaching more in keeping both with what children are able to do and "naturally" inclined to do given their level of maturation. Teachers and curriculum that fail to look to nature for cues as to how children learn and develop become, in Pestalozzi's (1801/1900) words, "artificial stifling machines" (p. 28). Pestalozzi became a fierce advocate for educating poor children. Pestalozzi's devotion to the cause of educating the poor grew so great that he spent all the money he earned, in addition to the money his wife received through an inheritance, on his educational endeavors (Barlow, 1977).

During his lifetime Pestalozzi operated a series of schools that served as a well of practical knowledge and insight into how children learn—in Neuhof (1774–1779), Stans (1799), Burgdorf (1801–1804), and Yverdon (1805–1825). His firsthand experiences as an educator lent him credibility as an educational reformer not only in his time but throughout the nineteenth century. In 1781, Pestalozzi began to explore the lifelong theme of his educational writings—naturalistic education—with the publication of his successful novel, *Leonard and Gertrude* (1801/1906). Pestalozzi subsequently published *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801/1900), a guide for mothers on how to educate their children and an explanation of Pestalozzi's educational "method." In Yverdon, Pestalozzi's school enjoyed particular success and stability and became "an educational mecca" (Gutek, 1995, p. 227) where distinguished visitors and Pestalozzi's followers came to see his methods in action. Among these visitors were Friedrich Froebel, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Robert Owen (1771–1858), and William Maclure (1763–1840). While Pestalozzi's educational methods are influential, Trohler (2001) argues the "spirit" of his methods—the way he values and respects his students—are his most important educational legacy.

Through the influence of Pestalozzi's followers and former teaching assistants, such as Joseph Neef (1770–1854), Pestalozzi's educational ideas spread. Neef was especially important in helping to bring many of Pestalozzi's ideas to the U.S. Neef authored two books in which he attempts to explain Pestalozzi's method. Additionally Pestalozzi's educational ideas and methods were published in national and regional

education journals including, for instance, Mann's *Common School Journal* and Barnard's *American Journal of Education*. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Pestalozzian principles were becoming well-established teachings of normal schools. In 1865, the National Teachers' Association endorsed Pestalozzianism after visiting a training school in Oswego, New York, where principal Edward A. Sheldon was implementing Pestalozzian ideas, particularly the object method. Sheldon's version of Pestalozzi's ideas became known as the Oswego method (Lucas, 1997; Ogren, 2005). By the turn of the twentieth century Pestalozzi was well-known among trained teachers and his ideas were regularly discussed at regional and national teacher institutes and conferences (King, 2010).

Pestalozzi's influence on Dewey's ideas is evidenced by their many common themes. Dewey also occasionally made his connection with Pestalozzi's ideas explicit, such as in the book co-authored with his daughter Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow* (1915/2016). In *Schools of To-Morrow* Dewey and his daughter explore common themes of progressive education such as "natural development," a reorganized curriculum, and play, connecting these themes with the work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Maria Montessori (1870–1952). While it would be worthwhile to explore the influence between Dewey and each of these thinkers, we are especially interested in the Dewey–Pestalozzi connection because of the unique way these two thinkers approached education from an "experimental" point of view.

### **Pestalozzi and Dewey's Common Themes**

At times during each of their lives, Pestalozzi and Dewey each ran schools that were considered "experimental" in nature. One significant aspect of Pestalozzi's educational approach is his belief education could be improved through trial and error, through experience and experimentation (Barlow, 1977). As a whole, Pestalozzi's educational career demonstrates his belief in this principle.

Likewise, Dewey maintained a devotion to the principles of experience and experimentation, the most notable example being Dewey's Laboratory School at The University of Chicago. A corollary to Pestalozzi's and Dewey's belief in the importance of laboratory schools was their belief educators can improve their craft through experience and study. Both Pestalozzi and Dewey devoted great time and effort to the task of training teachers. Both men taught a steady stream of teachers and observers who came to their respective "laboratory" schools to learn new pedagogical approaches because both men believed in the power of teacher training to improve teachers' craft. We now move to consider several specific similarities.

### **School Is for Life**

The first theme we explore addresses the purpose of schooling. One phrase that became a motto of sorts for Pestalozzi and his followers was the phrase, “We must learn not for school but for life.” The motto, which has origins in Seneca’s *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius* (Graver & Long, 2015),<sup>1</sup> suggests school should not be disconnected from life but rather should be life itself, since Pestalozzi did not think a school’s curriculum should be blind to the child’s future needs (Green, 1912), but the main curricular focus should be on the life the child lives presently. An example of this motto in action is when, in 1799, the Helvetic government asked Pestalozzi to head an orphanage in Stans where many children had lost their families to war. It was with these children that Pestalozzi began to develop his method of teaching “heart, hands, and head” (Gutek, 1995, p. 225). Pestalozzi’s teaching in Yverdon provides another example; students went on nature walks, learned to play music, swam, climbed mountains, and ice skated. He taught students to read, but he also taught them to draw, write, and do physical exercise. Pestalozzi’s schools were unique for their time and stories of his schools changed the way many thought about teaching and pedagogy. Pestalozzi’s pedagogy demonstrates his belief that experiences of life itself, especially experiences of childhood, could be educative.

Dewey later echoed Pestalozzi’s ideas when he argued school should not merely be a preparation for life but should be life itself. In *School and Society* (1915) Dewey says,

[School] has a chance to affiliate itself with life, to become the child’s habitat, where he learns through directed living, instead of being a place to only learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future. It gets a chance to be a miniature community, an embryonic society. (p. 15)

Later, in *Experience & Education*, Dewey (1938) clarifies he did not intend for school curriculum to be blind to the future needs of students. However, Dewey, like Pestalozzi, did not see this end as being incompatible with the need to make a student’s school experience mirror real life and even to be life itself. The emphasis that school was and should be real living was an integral theme for Pestalozzi; this theme became a major component of education for Dewey and for the U.S. progressive education movement of the twentieth century.

### **The Family as a Model for School**

The second Pestalozzi–Dewey theme we explore has to do with the school environment: namely the importance of school becoming its own community or family. Pestalozzi understood sooner than many other

educational thinkers the social dimension of schooling was a crucial part of a child's education. Pestalozzi "realized that natural development for a [hu]man means social development" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/2016, p. 38). One of the means by which Pestalozzi sought socially to develop his pupils was through the type of school community he built. "In each of [Pestalozzi's] institutions he strove to develop a family atmosphere in which he served as a father to both pupils and teachers and in which teachers were big brothers, as it were, to the pupils" (Barlow, 1977, p. 17). Furthermore, Pestalozzi reacted against the harshness of school discipline often present in his day. While Pestalozzi does not disapprove of corporal punishment outright, he believes such punishment should be modelled after the corporal punishment provided by a loving parent (Green, 1912). Such punishment, Pestalozzi maintains, typically does not produce resentment in the child—nor should the discipline given by a teacher. Pestalozzi argues teaching should be motivated by a love and concern for one's pupils.

For Pestalozzi, the family forms the ideal place where education should occur. He theorizes that for political systems to succeed they need citizens who are educated morally (Trohler, 2001). However, for those children whose families are unwilling or unable to fulfil this need due to issues of poverty or other challenges, it makes sense for a school to step in and use some of the same approaches that a family might use intellectually and morally to educate children. Viewed in a contemporary context, one might note Pestalozzi's rationale for "moral education," which became commonplace in the early nineteenth century, is steeped in what Valencia (1997) refers to as "deficit thinking." Regardless of what families did or did not provide, two short quotations from Pestalozzi's *The Education of Man* (1951) help to show his emphasis on what educators should provide: Pestalozzi argues, "What [a teacher] really needs is a sense of love" (p. 33); he also maintains love is "the essential point from which the essentials of education flow" (p. 33). While such declarations may sound unsurprising today, in Pestalozzi's day and time during which teachers tended to be more authoritarian in their approach, stating such a philosophy of education was unusual. Indeed, Pestalozzi "sought to create an emotionally secure environment in his schools that was conducive to learning and made students feel like members of a loving family" (Murphy, 2006, p. 181), within which, instead of using fear as a main source of motivation, he attempted to appeal to a child's interests. Pestalozzi's coming to be known as a loving and caring teacher to his students is represented in art which depicts him as a teacher always among and involved actively with teaching students. One example is Konrad Grob's (1879) painting, *Pestalozzi with the Orphans in Stans*.



Konrad Grob (1879), *Pestalozzi with the Orphans in Stans*.

In *The School and Society*, Dewey (1899/1915) does not speak overtly as Pestalozzi does about the importance of a teacher’s “love” for his or her pupils, yet Dewey implies love through his emphasis on the school as a community. He also emphasizes the school should, in many respects, be modeled after the family: not merely “a place set apart to learn lessons” (p. 11), but rather “a genuine form of active community life” (p. 11). In a later edition of *The School and Society*, he makes the school–family connection more explicit, describing how the family was the model for his own laboratory school: “we are attempting to keep a family spirit throughout the school, and not the feeling of isolated classes and grades” (p. 175). Dewey again echoes Pestalozzi when he writes, “...if the end in view is the development of a spirit of co-operation and community life, discipline must grow out of and be relative to such an aim” (p. 14).

### ***The Use of Concrete Things and Experiences to Teach***

The third theme we consider is the importance of using concrete things and experiences to teach as opposed to teaching abstract concepts and ideas. Pestalozzi stresses the importance of strengthening “the impressions of important objects by allowing them to affect you through different senses” (1801/1900, p. 202). In particular, Pestalozzi became known for his “object lessons” which use all the child’s senses to help teach a particular concept (or to stimulate his or her senses). More broadly, Pestalozzi advocates for the use of “concrete” things to teach children whenever possible. In a 1774 diary entry, Pestalozzi advises teachers to, “Teach him absolutely nothing by words that you can teach him by the things themselves” (quoted in Murphy, 2006, p. 184). Concerning the teaching of numbers, Pestalozzi emphasizes how, “The various relations of the numerical system must be brought home to the sense-impression of the children by means of real objects” (1801/1900,

p. 248). He makes clear he believes concrete experiences and the use of real objects should, whenever possible, precede the use of words, seeming to fear that words, if not coupled with educative experiences, could fall on deaf ears and fail truly to communicate to children. In one example Pestalozzi describes his use of movable letters to teach children to spell and in another "...arithmetic was taught with pebbles and fractions were taught by cutting fruit into parts" (Murphy, 2006, p. 181). "Pestalozzi's theory called for an active pupil, for a pupil who did many things, who had many experiences..." (Barlow, 1977, p. 16).

This focus on concrete things and experiences as educative also is a central Deweyan theme seen in Dewey's (1899/1915) *The School and Society*. When Dewey writes on the "abstract," he refers to ideas remote from the child's mind and disconnected from real-life experience. For example, he tells how, when children are doing work in physics or chemistry, it "is not for the purpose of making technical generalizations or even arriving at abstract truths. Children simply like to do things and watch to see what will happen" (p. 43). Similarly, Dewey (1915) explains "[t]he child has not much instinct for abstract inquiry" (p. 53). For Dewey, children's minds are ready for concrete experiences but not necessarily for adult, "abstract" generalizations. Dewey, like Pestalozzi, favors the use of concrete, "real life" experiences:

The child comes to the traditional school with a healthy body and a more or less unwilling mind, though, in fact, he does not bring both his body and his mind with him; he has to leave his mind behind, because there is no way to use it in the school. If he had a purely abstract mind, he could bring it to school with him, but his is a concrete one, interested in concrete things, and unless these things get over into school life he cannot take his mind with him. (p. 73)

Furthermore, Dewey connects to Pestalozzi's ideas when he writes how "This concrete logic of action long precedes the logic of pure speculation or abstract investigation..." (p. 134).

### **Universal Education**

Pestalozzi's theory is rooted in "universal educability" (Adelman, 2000, p. 106), a principle on which the common school movement is built. Pestalozzi's importance to the thinking of nineteenth-century, common-school reformers is argued by Barnard (1906) in *Pestalozzi and His Educational System*. Pestalozzi's focus on educating the poor altered how his contemporaries viewed educational access. Similarly, Dewey rose to prominence by being a champion of universal education. While his *The School and Society* (1899/1915) does not explicitly address the topic of universal education, Dewey nevertheless creates a pedagogy rooted in the nature of children, in their interests and their inclinations. In this

way Dewey, like Pestalozzi, helped establish a theoretical and practical basis for universal education.

### **Student Interest and Individualization**

Teachers have not always set out to make their curriculum interesting or relevant to students. This was particularly the case in Pestalozzi's day and, according to Dewey, in his day as well. However, each in their own way Pestalozzi and Dewey encouraged teachers of their day to appeal to students' individual interests and dispositions. For both Pestalozzi and Dewey, curriculum is not "one size fits all," rather they argue teachers should tailor teaching to students. Pestalozzi argues, "Each pupil must be allowed...wide latitude in the course his development takes" (Barlow, 1977, p. 17). Moreover, in an excerpt quoted by Horace Mann, Pestalozzi states, "Interest in study is the first thing which a teacher should endeavor to excite and keep alive" (Mann, 1846, p. 200). Pestalozzi used approaches not traditional in his day to appeal to the interests of his students (Barlow, 1977). His students often sang in the hallways between classes; his teachers sometimes took their classes outside into nature to allow children to see, experience, and be engaged in the scientific lessons they were studying. In other words, Pestalozzi's curricular and pedagogical approaches attempt to build on student interest and employ it in the educational process.

Similarly, Dewey seeks to use student interest as a building block in the educational process. At one point in *The School and Society* (1899/1915), Dewey speaks of four foundational student interests useful to the teaching process: interest in conversation/communication; interest in art; interest in making/building things; and student interest in finding out or discovering new things. Dewey refers to these four types of student interest as the "natural resources, the uninvested capital, upon the exercise of which depends the active growth of the child" (p. 45). In other words, for Dewey, student interest was a key that unlocked the learning process for students.

### **Conclusion**

We contend Pestalozzi and Dewey's educational philosophies hold promise for present-day generations of educators who seek to engage students in a time when distractions from learning abound—perhaps most notably technological distractions. We argue that to appropriate properly an educational idea it is helpful to understand more about the origins of an idea, and this is one reason we argue it makes sense to reconsider the nexus of the educational ideas of Pestalozzi and Dewey.

In our study of Pestalozzi, we find the more we read Pestalozzi's texts, the more they inform our understanding of Dewey. In many respects we surmise Dewey's work continues a conversation Pestalozzi

began. At times Dewey's thought strongly echoes that of Pestalozzi as we demonstrate by the examples we briefly offer: the importance of school being in harmony with "real life"; conceptualizing school as a family (and using the family as a model for school); a focus on the educative power of concrete things and experiences; the importance of a universal education; and a focus on student interest as vital to the educational process. Understanding Pestalozzi's central ideas provides an additional lens through which to read and understand Dewey. For this reason, the Pestalozzi–Dewey connection is a line of inquiry that deserves greater attention and study.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The original quotation from Seneca varies in wording and possibly in meaning. See p. 423.

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