

EDUCATION and LITERACY

Peter N Stearns, Ph.D.

Overview Education has always occurred. Humans have relatively few instincts, and require a long period of training and socialization to be effective adults. So communities and parents have always spent time conveying essential knowledge to children, including the values emphasized in their particular community. Both before and after the advent of agriculture, many local societies developed stories and storytellers – like the griots in parts of sub-Saharan Africa – who would pass along histories and myths associated with the community and family ancestry. Along with this oral tradition, however, the rise of agriculture generated limited resources that might be used to support some children in a more formal educational experience. Writing – which took time to learn – needed this investment, but could reward it with students capable of serving governments or businesses with at least basic skills. More elaborate religions also promoted training, particularly for those destined for priesthoods of one sort or another; this was particularly true for the “religions of the book” in the Middle East, but Hinduism and Buddhism developed literatures as well. At the same time, elaborate schooling long remained too expensive for all but a minority, and only a few societies ever introduced literacy for more than a small minority as well.

Early Efforts Schools in Mesopotamia and Egypt stressed training scribes, whose knowledge of writing was vital to the new government bureaucracies. Early writing systems, with hundreds of characters, were not easy to learn. This encouraged an emphasis in many schools on obedience, rigid discipline including whippings for poor performance, and memorization through repetition. Early education was also largely reserved for boys, beginning around age 9, though a few girls might be tutored at home. Religious temples or private, fee-charging schools were the main sources of training.

The Classical Period Educational patterns diversified with the rise of classical civilizations. Jewish schools emphasized not only literacy but memorization of key religious texts, with more advanced training for a smaller number of young men in theology and Jewish law. Basic education was made compulsory for boys. Confucianism encouraged the expansion of private schools in China, including recommendations for good teaching. The Han dynasty also set up training schools for aspiring bureaucrats, with 30,000 students and 7,000 teachers by 25 BCE (but this out of an overall population of 56 million). Greek city states established primary schools, mainly for the upper classes, but also a secondary system that taught rhetoric (speaking) and science. Harsh discipline continued in most of these systems, and memorization predominated in part because few books were available.

The Postclassical Period Religious sponsorship of education predictably expanded in this period. Hindu temples organized much of the education in India, highlighting spiritual training. Islam stressed the importance of education, particularly in learning the Qu’ran. Even poor families tried to afford some education in the mosques or Qu’ranic schools. Some girls now attended schools as well. A system of Maktab schools spread from the 10th century onward, stressing religion but also philosophy and literature, and of course basic literacy and arithmetic skills. Overall, it was estimated that 30% of the population of the Middle East was literate by the end of the period, undoubtedly the highest level achieved to that point in any large society. Islamic education also spread to parts of Africa, including the great learning center in Timbuktu. Education in Western Europe lagged, in part because of the political instability and economic constraints. But training for priests expanded gradually, and many monasteries established schools. Education benefited from economic advance and urban growth by the 12th century, and universities emerged for the first time in this region for theology, law and medicine.

The Early Modern Period European adaptations of the printing press made books more available from the late 15th century onward. This encouraged literacy, as did the expansion of commerce (which promoted interest reading training books in business and the crafts); and Protestantism explicit promoted the importance of being able to read the Bible. Schools also spread in North America, for white colonists primarily, creating a higher literacy rate than anywhere else in the world by the 18th century. Education also spread rapidly in Japan by this point, boosting literacy here as well, particularly under the influence of Confucianism. Schools in the Middle East remained predominantly religious, and the Ottoman Empire long hesitated to allow the introduction of printing lest people be encouraged to challenge religious orthodoxy. Education in most regions continued to stress rote learning and memorization. But some European theorists, such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, did begin to emphasize children’s capacity to learn and the desirability of encouraging more creativity.

The Long 19th Century The arguments about the importance of education for social and individual progress struck home increasingly by the early 19th century, while industrialization convinced many reformers that more children must be protected from factory work and sent to school. Governments began to take responsibility for setting up primary as well as secondary schools. Increasingly, schooling was actually required by law, a huge innovation: several northern states in the United States, plus Germany, led the way here. Equally important was the realization, by many workers as well as members of the middle class, and ultimately even peasants, that education was essential to their children's future. By the later 19th century compulsory education and primary and secondary school systems had spread throughout Europe and North America, achieving over 90% literacy among the younger generations for the first time in history. By this point also, essential education included not only literacy and numeracy, but some attention to history (usually with a strong nationalist bent) and science as well. Requirements also embraced girls, initially on the premise that in a modern society educated mothers were essential to produce competent sons. Girls' curriculum was different, with emphasis on domestic subjects, but the gender gap in schooling steadily narrowed. These approaches to education spread to other parts of the world, for when visitors studied Europe and the United States, to determine what reforms might be needed at home to create modern, industrial states, the education systems stood out. Thus the introduction of compulsory education in Japan, in 1872, was one of the first moves of the Meiji regime, generating widespread literacy by the 1890s. Japanese education was held apart to some extent, by greater emphasis on community and loyalty to the national emperor; but science and technology received new attention, modifying the Confucian tradition considerably. Most other regions could not yet afford universal systems, but governments from Russia to Latin America expanded school systems fairly rapidly, with resultant gains in literacy. And colonial administrations in India and Africa also expanded schooling, in part to train potential local officials. Colonial schools, including Christian missionary schools, balanced an emphasis on Western languages and values, including predominantly Western history and literature, with a desire not to encourage too much independent thinking. Change was substantial nevertheless, and as in Europe and North America it included at least some new opportunities for girls.

The Contemporary Period Education continued to spread widely during the past century. One of the first foci of new communist regimes was an extraordinary rapid expansion of schools, from primary levels to universities, with required attendance at least through secondary school. Turkish reforms emphasized widespread, and secular, education. In the West, education also continued to expand, building on prior trends, and ages of required attendance pushed upward, with an increasing majority now completing secondary school at least. Education now seemed vital in training for a modern economy, and as a means of promoting political loyalty as well. Many systems continued to stress memorization, but there was increasing interest in encouraging some wider student inquiry as well. Outside the industrial and communist societies education gains also accelerating, but with more limitations due to resource constraints. In some regions, also, local cultures encouraged boys over girls, though everywhere the gender education gap continued to decline. Religious schools featured strongly in much of the Middle East, emphasizing Islamic learning; this contrasted with largely secular educational orientations in much of the rest of the world. By the later 20th century, in many societies, university education was seen as essential at least for a growing minority. University systems expanded rapidly, mixing government and private efforts. Women, in many societies, took particular advantage. By the early 21st century 55% of all university students were women in countries as diverse as Iran and the United States. Overall, the growth of education served as one of the biggest global changes in the contemporary period, and it mixed regional diversities with a number of common trends.

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A History of the University in Europe: Volume 2, Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800). Edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Discussion

1. What was the traditional educational system in sub-Saharan Africa? How did it compare with educational systems in Asia and Europe?
2. How did writing and literacy affect education in early civilizations? What groups of people had access to education?
3. What were the main features of the Confucian approach to education? How did this approach extend beyond China?
4. What contributed to the rise of postclassical educational institutions in Islamic societies? What role did the government play in these institutions? What about religion?
5. Compare educational systems in the main European and Asian societies in the postclassical period
6. Discuss women's access to education during the Agricultural Age. When and why did this begin to change?
7. How have the needs of governments shaped education, from early civilizations to the present? What have been the main changes in this relationship over time?
8. Discuss the relationship between the industrial revolution and mass education. Was the relationship the same in Europe as it was in Japan and other "latecomer" industrializers?
9. What changes did 19th and 20th century colonialism introduce into education in Africa and Asia? How significant were they?
10. During the contemporary world history period, did education become a global phenomenon, or it is still best understood in terms of regional differences?