

New Education 19th - 21st centuries

[Béatrice HAENGELI-JENNI](#)

ABSTRACT

Emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, Progressive Education became a major international educational movement in the 1920s. Its advocates demanded profound educational reforms based on a scientific understanding of the child and on a reversal of educational logic. School, it was argued, should adapt to the child by respecting his or her needs and interests and allowing him or her to learn through experience, activity and cooperation. It was therefore a question of rethinking the curricula, teaching methods and the respective roles of teachers and pupils so that the latter could appropriate knowledge for themselves. Those who promoted Progressive Education campaigned for coeducation, so that boys and girls could benefit from the same teaching in a shared environment. For them, education should be natural, close to life, and should prepare pupils for social life through an experience of community life in school. This is how they would learn tolerance and respect for others, both children and adults.



« Workshop » : In the “Maison des Petits”, the classroom was like a workshop.

Progressive Education is an international movement of educational reform which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and had its golden age during the interwar years. Its advocates proposed a “Copernican revolution” placing the child, rather than scholarly knowledge, at the centre of educational activity. They demanded a thorough reform of education based on scientific knowledge of the child, adapted to his or her needs, and promoted learning through experience. They argued that only science was capable of measuring the individual abilities of each child. They therefore relied on the sciences that henceforth considered the child as a veritable object of study: psychology, paedology, anthropology and biology. In general, they criticised the so-called traditional school that they regarded as “encyclopaedic” and unnatural “by making all pupils march in step.” School, they argued, should not be cut off from the world but be as natural as possible, taking its inspiration from

the functioning of the community. This was why they advocated the coeducation of the sexes and opened their schools to girls as well as boys. While some activities were gender specific (woodwork and metalwork for boys, sewing for girls), the teaching methods and activities were the same and all pupils took part in community tasks. By the 1920s, articles praising coeducation explained its benefits based on the building of character, on learning tolerance and on preparation for life since, as John Dewey put it “the only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life.”

Although the majority of supporters shared these principles, the Progressive Education movement was not homogenous. It brought together diverse methods, practices and points of view which became the source of tensions and controversies throughout its evolution, but which also make it rich and interesting. The term *Progressive Education* (*Éducation nouvelle*) can be translated into numerous languages, which reflects the wide range of regions in which it developed: *Reformpädagogik*, *New Education*, *Progressive Education*, *Educación Nueva*, *Escola Nova*. In French *Éducation nouvelle* was initially a synonym of “*éducation fonctionnelle*” (Claparède, 1931) or “*école active*” (Ferrière, 1922) and subsequently evolved into the term “*méthodes actives*” in the 1960s.

Progressive Education emerged at the end of the nineteenth century through the foundation of several “new schools” in Europe and the United States. The first was founded in 1880 by Cecil Reddie—Abbostholme School (UK)—soon followed by Bedales School in 1893, founded by John H. Badley. The movement rapidly spread to Germany where Hermann Lietz opened his first school in Haubinda (1901) followed by several others in subsequent years. Similar establishments were set up in Switzerland, France, Belgium and the Netherlands in the same period. In France, the *École des Roches* opened in 1899, on the model of the English schools. As boarding schools situated in the countryside—*Landerziehungsheim* in German—the new schools offered different teaching: close contact with nature, coeducation, handicrafts, physical education, natural sciences, modern languages, community life. The favoured methods were learning through experience and “self-government.”

In the same period, Maria Montessori opened her first *Casa dei Bambini* (1907) in a working class neighbourhood in Rome, which offered schooling adapted to the particular needs of young children, particularly favouring learning through play. Other schools for young children were opened during these years, like the “*Maison des Petits*” founded by Édouard Claparède in Geneva in 1913, which served as a training school for the students of the Institut J.-J. Rousseau who went there to learn the new methods of teaching.

The first attempt at linking these initiatives together in a network dates back to 1899, when the Genevan Adolphe Ferrière founded the *Bureau international des écoles nouvelles* (International Bureau of the New Schools), centralising information and documentation on these establishments. But it was above all the years after the First World War that saw the emergence of groups wholly dedicated to this cause in several regions of the world, thus contributing to the institutionalisation of the movement. The first international association—the New Education Fellowship (*Ligue internationale pour l'Éducation nouvelle*)—was founded in 1921 on the initiative of a group of educators. Through the organisation of biannual conferences and the publication of journals in several languages, this league contributed to the extension of the movement on an international level. Its members came from diverse backgrounds, educational professions (educators, primary school teachers, school principals), scientific fields (biologists, doctors, psychologists) and intellectual fields (philosophers, writers, thinkers), but all were convinced that only a profound educational reform could pacify the world and prevent wars. By extending the methods practiced in the new schools to the whole education system, they hoped they could transform society towards greater tolerance and peace.

Women played an important role in this league, whether as actors in the field or as delegates in the forums and working groups. They actively contributed to the spread of the principles of Progressive Education by publishing articles and books, running educational journals or giving lectures. Most were also involved in the feminist movements and/or in child protection movements on a local, national or international level. As a result, they contributed to promoting the new educational principles in specifically female networks, within which many actors fought for the cause of children. In this, these women played a pivotal role that promoted the circulation of the principles of Progressive Education on an international level.

While the 1920s were years of hope, even utopia, when universalist projects were the subject of impassioned speeches, the 1930s were marked by an inward-looking nationalist turn within the movement, which led to more concrete experiences on a local level. At that time Progressive Education was divided by tensions and debates

reflecting differences of interpretation between different regions and different individuals. The internationalist zeal was diminished, but several schools, groups and journals continued in several countries until the Second World War.

After the Second World War, Progressive Education inspired a number of projects of school reform, like the Langevin-Wallon plan in France, even if these did not bring about a complete overhaul of the system. The movement was reconfigured in the 1960s, especially following the events of May 1968. Several alternative experiences became talking points, including Summerhill School and its non-directive pedagogy, the institutional pedagogy of Fernand Oury and Raymond Fonvielle and the Freinet technique promoted by ICEM (*Institut coopérative d'école moderne*) throughout the Francophone world. The teachers of the 1970s and 1980s kept up the momentum by creating, in France and elsewhere, diverse groups of active pedagogy (*pédagogie active*) or "école moderne," within which many parents fought to defend the idea of a school that was closer to life, combining school and family more closely.

Although the movement has faded over time, the principles of progressive education are still visible today, having had a lasting impact on the teaching practices that they helped transform. Names such as Decroly, Montessori, Freinet, Claparède, Dewey, Ferrière, Cousinet have lasted across the decades and, still today, are key figures of modern pedagogy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BREHONY, K.J., « A New Education for a New Era: The Contribution of the Conferences of the New Education Fellowship to the Disciplinary Field of Education 1921-1938 », *Paedagogica historica*, 40 (5-6), 2004, p. 733-755.

HAMELINE, D., *L'éducation dans le miroir du temps*, Lausanne, LEP, 2002.

HAENGGELI-JENNI, B., *Les relations science-militance dans le mouvement d'Éducation nouvelle*. Pour l'Ère nouvelle (1920-1940), Berne, Peter Lang, à paraître.

Source URL: <https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/educating-europeans/new-education>