

**‘Educated humanity is a blessing
for the world.’**

Educating in the Spirit 1 of Pestalozzi

The importance of education for the moral, technological and economic development of society and state is well known all over the world. In many countries the education system has been subject to permanent, in part even dramatic change for years, if not decades. That would not be happening if the powers that be were generally satisfied with the educational standards. It is a fact that when they leave school, many students have not reached the required level — measured against the official curriculum — and in many areas their knowledge is often scanty.

It is also a fact that educational policies in many countries are creating increasing pressure on those involved. Schools are more tightly organised, teamwork is a requirement for teachers and they are bound by quality-assurance systems developed on scientific principles. Heads are given wider powers, hierarchical structures are strengthened. In many EU countries, and in non-EU Switzerland as well, courses at universities and other institutions of higher education are strictly organised down to the last detail according to the ‘Bologna’ model, which originated in America and has become the official norm in many EU countries. In this system, students have to work through a prescribed number of topics in standardised time units. What is being looked for is not education, and certainly not education at leisure, but efficient and cost-effective training — young people are to be fitted for tasks in the economy and administration. Standardised report cards, which mean

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the same everywhere in the world, are to record the results of standardised courses which can be recognised in other countries and qualify the graduate for a particular step on the career ladder.

Doubtless all these and any future measures have been and will be taken with the best of intentions. Despite that, I consider much of what has been done ineffective and counterproductive. The reforms are too one-sided in orientation. They seem to reflect a blindness to the problems thousands of teachers are wrestling with every day. All the political effort is focused on the reorganisation of *structures*, there is a lot of talk of money and of systems but hardly any of children, of pupils, of individual teachers and the demands made on them by educational theory and practice which they are often scarcely able to meet any more. Nor is there talk of time, of taking one's time, of thoroughness. Pupils seem to be looked on as empty vessels that can be filled at will as long as the regulations, syllabuses and textbooks have been compiled accordingly. If a new problem crops up anywhere, there is an immediate call for a new school subject. That kind of thing looks good because it proves that one wants to get to the root of the problem, but it is rare that anyone asks whether the pupils, teachers and the school as a whole can cope with it and what cuts other objectives must suffer.

This raises the question whether any of those who are behind this constant expansion of the curriculum have ever been present when parents were desperately trying to help their unmotivated and so far unsuccessful child not to get left behind. Have they any idea of the scenes there are in many homes because the children don't enjoy going to school? Because they are confused by all the things that have to be 'gone through' in class, but not thoroughly practised, and are often — together with their despairing parents — at the end of their tether. Or do they have a magic wand the teacher can wave when extremely spoilt children, as if it were a matter of course, make disparaging comments about or arrogantly reject any demand that requires them to make an effort?

But how is it that a large proportion of our fellow citizens have come to believe that changes in the system aimed at the standardisation and hierarchical management of the educational process, as well as more intensive use of technical resources, can really improve the quality of education? We have been going down that road for many years

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and yet one could not really say that there has been any clear improvement in educational attainment. My own assessment is that trust in the above-mentioned measures remains undiminished because those with a decisive voice in educational policy, educational administration and educational research have transferred — presumably unconsciously, as a matter of course — solutions that have proved at least partly profitable in the economic field to the areas of education and school organisation. It is assumed that greater concentration of resources, tighter organisation, stricter standardisation and more efficient structures will guarantee success. *But success in education is determined by different laws than in the economy.* If this fact is ignored, all reforms degenerate into activity for its own sake. What is needed, then, is a change of focus, away from purely organisational, legal and financial factors and onto educational aims, practical matters of teaching and real everyday problems.

This means that all those who have responsibility for our children's education must be guided by the laws that operate in this area. It means bearing in mind the *essence*, the *nature* of education, learning, teaching and even the way we bring up children in general. It is a never-ending task which falls upon all generations; if we refuse to accept it, the result will be failures, confusion and suffering. The more often we call to mind the essential nature of education, the more our teaching will achieve true *quality*.

That brings me to the central theme of this book. My concern is to bring out the *essence* of education, learning and schools. My concern is to *refine* our work as educators and to bring real *quality* to students' performance.

There is a *tension* between the reality of our present-day education, dominated as it is by a belief in progress that cannot see beyond technical/organisational matters, and the essence of education — teaching and learning. It is a tension which is often hard to bear, but anyone who does not sense it, who does not expose himself to it by trying, as far as he is able, to reconcile the two aspects, will find his work does not bear fruit. He will remain a mere cog in the machinery of social processes which lack direction and constantly create more problems than they solve.

The aim of this book, then, is *encouragement*. To encourage *teachers* to devote themselves to this search for the essence of education as

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they go about their everyday business. I would also like to encourage *politicians* to create the conditions that would allow the teachers to use their own initiative in carrying out their task of educating children in a way that is informed by this essence. And I would also like to encourage *parents* to support their children's teachers and the authorities in all their efforts in education, which are aimed at developing true humanity.

Anyone who occupies himself intensively with education in the widest sense cannot avoid examining the ideas of truly important philosophers of education. In this respect, a practising educationalist will have different preferences according to his own geographical or philosophical background and will consult different thinkers. As a Swiss, it is natural for me to turn to a man who is probably the best-known educational reformer in the world, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827). His writings reveal deep insights into the nature and vocation of mankind and reveal the ways in which a person can reach his true goal: full humanity. It was a fundamental experience of my over forty years as a teacher at practically all levels that I was always successful when I followed Pestalozzi. Therefore in this book as well I will follow Pestalozzi in my reflections on education, on learning and teaching.

But what does it mean, to follow Pestalozzi? It is certainly not to find out how Pestalozzi and his colleagues *themselves* taught and to copy that. Many of the details of the methods that were tried out in Burgdorf and Yverdon have outlived their usefulness; there is no point in trying to revive them. But it does make sense, it is helpful, to nurture within oneself the pedagogical spirit and the view of the nature and vocation of mankind which inspired a man like Pestalozzi. Many other thinkers have come to the same conclusions. They were all imbued with the same spirit. That is why I am committed to education *in the spirit of* Pestalozzi. Anyone who is open to this will not be in thrall to a system, will not be an imitator, but someone who shapes things himself, who is creatively active. Many paths will be open to him, but he will also be aware of which ones will lead him astray and that it is not sufficient to *instruct* pupils, but that they need education in the fullest sense of the word to enable them to shape their lives in a fruitful manner.

Naturally it is important to try to do well at school, to digest information, to acquire knowledge and skills, but that is not the sum total

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of education. Pestalozzi has shown that there is more to it than attaining prescribed learning outcomes; it is concerned with the whole person, with their physical, mental and psychological development. Only if we, as teachers, put the specific goals in the service of a higher unity will we be approaching a truly comprehensive goal: *the education of the whole person* in the spirit of Pestalozzi.

Already I can hear an objection: ‘You only see the individual, you’re not looking at society. Take a good look at it — the gap between rich and poor is getting bigger and bigger. Anonymous powers behind the scenes are getting more and more influential and more and more brazen. And not only young people, the whole of society is getting more and more violent. People foment wars, preach hatred and human rights are trodden underfoot. Fundamental values are ignored and millions and millions of people are caught up between manipulation, the struggle for a living and the search for pleasure. And in the race for profit the environment goes to wrack and ruin: the air, soil and water are polluted, species are dying out every day, the lungs of the world are being ruthlessly felled and monocultures, pushed by big business, are destroying the natural basis of the lives of hundreds of millions of people. And you come along talking about the individual education of the whole person!’

At that time of radical change, that turbulent period when the old society based on privilege began to give way to democracy, Pestalozzi found himself in a comparable situation. In Switzerland, where the unstable state had rested on a constitution graciously granted by Napoleon, the fall of the Emperor left a vacuum and it was highly uncertain which way things would go. In this situation the ageing Pestalozzi took up his pen and wrote his fundamental political work: *An die Unschuld, den Ernst und den Edelmut meines Zeitalters und meines Vaterlandes* (To the Innocence, Seriousness and High-mindedness of my Age and my Country). It is a passionate appeal to all those in positions of responsibility to work for law and justice. But the core of the book is his theory of education, and he formulated his belief in the lapidary sentence, ‘The beginning and end of my politics is education.’ For Pestalozzi, it was clear that revolutionary changes do not help people if they are not founded on the basic convictions and moral will of individuals. And this foundation can only be created by the education of the whole per-

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son. Thus Pestalozzi's final conclusion is: 'The continent has sunk so low morally, intellectually and socially, that it can only be saved by educating people in humanity, that is by forming fully rounded human beings.'

Educating people in the spirit of Pestalozzi is an ideal. It is, of course, in the nature of *all* ideals that the reality never matches up to them completely. Ideals are signposts, landmarks from which we take our bearings. They can inspire, but they can also be disheartening. The gap between what we would like to achieve and what we can achieve is really only bearable if we keep one basic fact in mind: *no one can achieve the absolute*. Failure, inadequacy, half measures are all part of life. But there is positive educational value in pupils seeing their teacher as a human being who knows his limitations, who does his best for them and does not despair.

I happily admit that it is easy to write a book about ideals but difficult to put them into practice. I myself — like most teachers, I imagine — have known days of annoyance, failure, despondency, even despair, but every time the only way out I could see was to look to ideals I recognised as valid despite my own inadequacies.

I am presenting my reflections and recommendations in twenty-six further, self-enclosed chapters, without sticking to a rigid system, which would appear artificial. The individual chapters should be regarded as pieces of a jigsaw, parts of a picture that has been built up in the course of my years of teaching. My hope is that these pieces will similarly combine to form a living picture for those who read this book.