

When Pestalozzi Went to Meet Bonaparte

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The effort to democratize higher education—to make it accessible to working, and even underclass people—has been a difficult and protracted journey, full of impediments and outright reversals. One juncture on this journey was the establishment of the first polytechnic institute, in Paris, 1795, by the French Revolution's National Convention. The purpose of the institute was to connect secondary and postsecondary education, especially for the preparation of civil and military engineers. (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. [1971]. New York: Oxford University Press, vol. II, p. 1097). But as prison educators know, political and administrative changes can sometimes reverse the effect of improvements, however secure they may seem at the moment. Hence, the story of Pestalozzi and the man who established the Paris polytechnic institute.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was an important Swiss educator. He is also known as the person who started teacher education, and was most famous while alive for establishing education-oriented juvenile institutions for delinquent war orphans. Pestalozzi was a supporter of the French Revolution, but there was a terrible problem after the French invaded and occupied Switzerland in 1798. In many villages all the parents had been massacred and the children needed help. The French army supported Pestalozzi in his prison education work, mostly by providing buildings and other resources, but there were limits to what they could do. In 1802 he went to meet Napoleon Bonaparte.

Pestalozzi made a journey to Paris, as a member of the consulta called by Bonaparte to decide the fate of Switzerland. He hoped to take advantage of his stay in France to disseminate his pedagogical ideas. But Bonaparte refused to see him, saying that he had something else to do besides discussing questions of a, b, c. Monge, the founder of the Polytechnic School, was more cordial, and kindly listened to the explanations of the Swiss pedagogue. But he concluded by saying, 'It is too much for us!' More disdainful still, Talleyrand had said, 'It is too much for the people!' (Compayre, G. [1907]. *The History of Pedagogy*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., pp. 434-435; emphasis in original).

Despite their different roles, Napoleon, Talleyrand, Monge, and Pestalozzi were supposed to be on the same side; that is precisely why this story is so difficult. Pestalozzi went on to help many people, but did it without assistance from those who should have been his natural allies. From literacy education, through to postsecondary and advanced education, prison educators have to be consistent in their support for each other—if only because very few others support them.

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