

Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the '*Committee on Publication Ethics*'

Online ISSN:2584-184X



Research Article

The Role of Education in Social Change Throughout History

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20381249>

Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between education and social change across major historical periods, from the philosophical academies of ancient Greece to the digital learning environments of the twenty-first century. Drawing on a range of scholarly sources, the analysis traces how systems of formal and informal learning have both enabled and constrained societal transformation. Education has served as an instrument of liberation in civil rights and anti-colonial struggles, as a mechanism for economic and cultural mobility during industrialisation, and as a site of ideological contest throughout the modern era. At the same time, educational institutions have historically reproduced inequality, reinforced dominant cultural norms, and served the interests of ruling elites. By examining this dual character—education as simultaneously empowering and controlling—this chapter argues that the relationship between schooling and social change is fundamentally shaped by the political and economic contexts in which learning occurs. The chapter concludes by reflecting on contemporary challenges, including digital inequalities and the commercialisation of schooling, and considers the conditions under which education can most effectively serve as a force for progressive social transformation.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2584-184X
- Received: 04-04-2026
- Accepted: 22-05-2026
- Published: 25-05-2026
- MRR:4(5); 2026: 272-278
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Kumar M, Singh R. The role of education in social change throughout history. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(5):272-278.

Access this Article Online



www.mrrjournal.in

KEYWORDS: education, social change, history of education, civil rights, Enlightenment, industrialisation, colonialism, digital learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Few forces have shaped the trajectory of human civilization as profoundly as education. In its broadest sense, education encompasses any deliberate process by which knowledge, values, skills, and cultural practices are transmitted from one generation to the next. Social change, in turn, refers to significant and lasting shifts in the structures, norms, and institutions that organize collective life—transformations in politics, economics, gender relations, class hierarchies, and cultural identities. The relationship between these two phenomena is neither simple nor unidirectional. Education has inspired revolutions, broadened the horizons of marginalized communities, and challenged entrenched orthodoxies. Yet it has also been deployed as an instrument of social control, used to naturalize existing inequalities and transmit the values of those in power.

Scholars across disciplines have long recognized this dual character. The sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that education performs a fundamentally integrative function, socializing individuals into the norms of their society (Durkheim, 1956). More critically, Paulo Freire contended that conventional schooling often reduces learners to passive recipients of officially sanctioned knowledge—what he famously called the "banking" model—and argued instead for a pedagogy grounded in critical consciousness and dialogue (Freire, 1970). Between these poles lies a rich and complex historical record in which educational systems have functioned simultaneously as mirrors of society and as engines of change within it.

This chapter traces that record from the ancient world to the present day, examining how education has shaped and been shaped by the social transformations of each era. Beginning with the philosophical academies of classical Greece and the gurukul tradition of ancient India, the discussion moves through the religious schooling of the medieval period, the intellectual upheavals of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the mass schooling projects of the industrial age, and the reform movements of the twentieth century. The chapter concludes by considering the opportunities and challenges posed by digital technology and globalization in the contemporary world. Throughout, the analysis attends to questions of access and exclusion, ideological content, and the conditions under which education has most effectively contributed to emancipatory social change.

Education in Ancient Civilisations

Greece and Rome

In ancient Greece, education was understood as preparation not merely for economic life but for citizenship and moral excellence. The Athenian ideal of *paideia*—roughly translated as the cultivation of the whole person through learning—encompassed physical training, music, rhetoric, and philosophy (Marrou, 1956). Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle each approached education as a philosophical practice with profound implications for the organization of society. Plato's Republic, for example, proposed an elaborate educational system in which citizens would be sorted by ability and trained for specific

social roles, reflecting the conviction that properly ordered education was the foundation of a just society (Plato, trans. 2000). The Socratic method—built on relentless questioning rather than passive instruction—represented a commitment to critical inquiry that would echo through centuries of educational thought.

Rome adapted and extended Greek educational ideals, placing considerable emphasis on rhetoric and civic virtue. The Roman orator Cicero argued that the educated man was necessarily a public man, and that education's highest purpose was to produce citizens capable of governing themselves and their communities (Cicero, trans. 1942). Roman schools, known as *ludus litterarius* at the elementary level and run by *grammatici* and *rhetores* at higher levels, served primarily the children of the propertied classes, underscoring a social pattern that would recur across many civilizations: education as a privilege that both reflected and reinforced existing hierarchies of power.

India and China

In ancient India, the *gurukul* system organized learning around close personal relationships between students and their teachers, or *gurus*. Students typically lived with their teachers for extended periods, receiving instruction in the Vedic scriptures, philosophy, mathematics, and the arts. This system was deeply embedded in the *varna* (caste) structure, and access to higher learning was largely restricted to the upper castes, particularly Brahmins (Kumar, 1991). Nevertheless, certain Buddhist institutions, most notably the great university at Nalanda, which flourished from roughly the fifth to the twelfth century CE, adopted a more open approach that attracted scholars from as far afield as China, Korea, and Southeast Asia (Keay, 2000).

In China, the development of a civil service examination system during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) represented one of history's most consequential experiments in using education as a mechanism for social organization. In principle, the examinations—which tested candidates on their mastery of classical Confucian texts—provided a pathway to official positions that was theoretically open to men of any background. In practice, the time and resources required to prepare for the examinations meant that success remained largely the preserve of those who could afford sustained periods of study. Nevertheless, the system did enable some degree of social mobility and helped to create a culture in which literacy and scholarly achievement were highly valued (Elman, 2000). The Confucian emphasis on education as the cultivation of moral character and social virtue gave Chinese educational thought a profoundly ethical dimension that paralleled, in interesting ways, the Greek ideal of *paideia*.

Education During the Middle Ages

Religious Institutions and the Preservation of Knowledge

With the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire and the turbulent centuries that followed, the institutional infrastructure of classical education largely collapsed in Europe. The responsibility for preserving and transmitting knowledge fell above all to the Christian Church, which maintained monastic and cathedral schools that served primarily to train clergy and

preserve scriptural and classical texts (Knowles, 1962). Monasteries such as those at Monte Cassino in Italy and Iona in Scotland functioned as intellectual centers where manuscripts were copied, libraries maintained, and a limited curriculum of the liberal arts—grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—was transmitted to a small clerical elite. The founding of the first European universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries—Bologna, Paris, and Oxford among the earliest—marked a significant development in the institutionalization of higher learning. These institutions drew on both Christian theology and the rediscovered philosophical works of Aristotle, which had been preserved and elaborated by Islamic scholars such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (Makdisi, 1981). The medieval university was not a modern secular institution; it operated under ecclesiastical authority and its curriculum was structured by theological priorities. Nevertheless, it provided a formal setting for debate, disputation, and the systematic pursuit of knowledge that would prove foundational to later intellectual developments.

Limited Access and Social Stratification

Throughout the medieval period, access to formal education remained extraordinarily limited. The vast majority of the population—serfs, peasants, craftspeople, and the rural poor—had no opportunity for formal schooling. Women were almost entirely excluded from the institutions of higher learning, though certain convents provided women of aristocratic background with some degree of literacy and learning (Power, 1975). This radical exclusivity meant that education functioned primarily to reproduce and legitimize existing social arrangements rather than to challenge them. The learned could read, interpret, and administer sacred and secular law; the unlettered were subject to that administration. Education was, in this sense, a key component of the apparatus of social power. Yet even within these constraints, education carried the seeds of potential disruption. The ability to read scripture for oneself was, as the Reformation would later demonstrate explosively, inherently subversive of clerical authority. The translation of the Bible into vernacular languages by figures such as John Wycliffe in fourteenth-century England and Jan Hus in fifteenth-century Bohemia helped to lay the intellectual groundwork for challenges to Church authority that would eventually transform the religious and political landscape of Europe (Lambert, 1992).

Renaissance and Enlightenment

Humanism and the Transformation of Learning

The Renaissance, which began in Italy in the fourteenth century and spread gradually northward through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, brought with it a profound reorientation of educational ideals. Humanist scholars such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and Juan Luis Vives turned away from the abstract theological disputes of Scholasticism and toward the literature, history, and rhetoric of the classical world, arguing that the purpose of education was to cultivate the fully human capacities of the individual (Burke, 2000). This shift placed new emphasis on the study of Greek and Latin texts, on eloquence and moral

philosophy, and on the education of laypeople—not just clergy—as an end in itself.

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440 radically amplified the social impact of these intellectual currents. By dramatically reducing the cost of producing and distributing written materials, printing made literacy both more practically useful and more widely attainable. Within a century of Gutenberg's invention, millions of books were in circulation across Europe, carrying not only religious and classical texts but also scientific works, political pamphlets, and vernacular literature (Eisenstein, 1980). The democratization of the written word did not by itself democratize society, but it created conditions in which ideas could spread with unprecedented speed and reach—a transformation whose political consequences became fully apparent during the Protestant Reformation and, later, the English Civil War.

The Enlightenment and Education as a Political Project

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries elevated education to a central position in political philosophy. Thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Mary Wollstonecraft each, in their own way, argued that human beings were shaped by their experiences and education, and that reforming the conditions of learning was therefore inseparable from reforming society. Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) proposed that children were not born with innate ideas but were shaped by experience, implying that properly designed education could develop virtuous, rational citizens (Locke, 1693/1968). Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) went further, arguing that conventional schooling suppressed the natural capacities of children and calling for an education rooted in experience, freedom, and the unfolding of natural development (Rousseau, 1762/1979).

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) brought the Enlightenment's educational ideals into direct confrontation with gender inequality, arguing that women's apparent intellectual inferiority was not a product of nature but of their systematic exclusion from serious education (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1995). This argument—that social inequality was reproduced through unequal access to education and could therefore be challenged through educational reform—became one of the defining themes of progressive social thought for the next two centuries. The Enlightenment thus transformed education from a primarily religious enterprise into a political one, linking the spread of knowledge to the ideals of liberty, equality, and rational self-governance.

Industrial Revolution and Modern Schooling

The Expansion of Public Education

The Industrial Revolution, which gathered force in Britain from the late eighteenth century and spread to Western Europe and North America through the nineteenth, transformed not only the economic landscape but the social demand for education. The growth of industrial capitalism required a workforce that was at least minimally literate and numerate, capable of following

written instructions, keeping records, and operating within the disciplined routines of factory production. At the same time, rapid urbanization, the dissolution of traditional community structures, and the emergence of an industrial working class created new anxieties about social order that educational reformers hoped to address through the provision of mass schooling (Green, 1990).

The development of national systems of public education in the nineteenth century was thus driven by a complex mix of motives: economic need, concerns about social stability, humanitarian impulses, and nationalist ambitions. In Prussia, a comprehensive system of compulsory elementary education was established early in the nineteenth century and became a model for reformers across Europe and North America. In Britain, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 established a national system of publicly funded schools for the first time, and by the end of the century, elementary education had been made both universal and compulsory (Simon, 1960). In the United States, the common school movement led by Horace Mann in the 1830s and 1840s promoted the idea of publicly funded, nondenominational schools as the foundation of democratic citizenship (Cremin, 1988).

Literacy, Social Mobility, and Class Transformation

The expansion of mass education during the industrial era had genuinely transformative social consequences, even if those consequences were more ambiguous than the reformers' rhetoric suggested. Rising rates of literacy enabled working-class people to read newspapers, political pamphlets, and labor organizing materials, contributing directly to the growth of trade union movements and working-class political parties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Access to secondary and higher education—however limited for most—did create pathways for social mobility that had not previously existed, and a growing professional middle class emerged whose position depended on educational credentials rather than inherited status (Hobsbawm, 1975).

Yet the class character of industrial-era schooling was also apparent. Elementary schools for the working class emphasized obedience, punctuality, and basic vocational skills, while the public schools and grammar schools attended by the middle and upper classes offered a classical curriculum designed to produce the future administrators, professionals, and gentlemen of Victorian society. Antonio Gramsci, writing from a Fascist prison in the 1930s, argued that this differentiated educational system was a key mechanism of what he called cultural hegemony—the process by which dominant classes maintained their power not primarily through force but through the dissemination of values and worldviews that naturalized existing social arrangements (Gramsci, 1971). From this perspective, the expansion of mass schooling was as much a technology of social control as a vehicle of liberation.

Education and Social Reform Movements

Civil Rights and the Struggle for Educational Equality

The twentieth century witnessed some of the most intense

struggles over education as a site of social change, nowhere more dramatically than in the United States civil rights movement. The systematic exclusion of African American children from quality public schooling under the system of segregation was not merely an educational injustice; it was a cornerstone of the broader architecture of racial subordination. The landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared racially segregated schools unconstitutional, was thus recognized by both its proponents and its opponents as a challenge to the entire edifice of *Jim Crow*. Civil rights leaders understood that access to quality education was inseparable from the broader project of political and economic equality (Kluger, 1975).

The struggle for educational equality was not, of course, limited to the United States. In South Africa, the Bantu Education Act of 1953, implemented under the apartheid regime, deliberately provided inferior schooling for Black South Africans as part of a systematic project of racial oppression. The Soweto Uprising of 1976, in which schoolchildren took to the streets to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, became one of the pivotal moments in the history of the anti-apartheid struggle, demonstrating both the centrality of education to systems of oppression and the power of educational grievances to mobilize mass resistance (Lodge, 1983).

Women's Education and the Movement for Gender Equality

The history of women's education is in many respects a microcosm of the broader history of education and social change. For most of recorded history, formal education was either entirely closed to women or offered only in severely restricted and domestically oriented forms. The women's suffrage movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were closely linked to campaigns for women's access to education, on the logic that full civic participation required the intellectual development that education provided. The opening of universities to women—Oxford and Cambridge grudgingly admitted women to full membership only in 1920 and 1948 respectively—was part of a wider social transformation in gender relations that education both reflected and accelerated (Dyhouse, 1995).

By the late twentieth century, girls' educational attainment in many parts of the world had not only caught up with but in some respects surpassed that of boys, a transformation with far-reaching implications for labor markets, family structures, and political participation. Research by the World Bank and other international organizations has consistently found that girls' education is among the most cost-effective investments in economic and social development, reducing fertility rates, improving child health, and expanding the economic productivity of entire communities (World Bank, 2001). This body of evidence has given renewed urgency to the campaign for universal girls' education in regions where gender gaps in schooling persist.

Education and Anti-Colonial Struggles

European colonialism imposed educational systems on colonized peoples that were explicitly designed to serve colonial interests—producing compliant administrators and workers while denigrating indigenous knowledge and culture. In India, Thomas Macaulay's infamous Minute on Education (1835) argued for an educational system that would produce a class of Indians "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"—a project of cultural assimilation through education that would later be characterized by postcolonial theorists as a form of epistemic violence (Macaulay, 1835, as cited in Viswanathan, 1989, p. 3). Similar dynamics played out across Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean, where colonial schooling systematically undermined indigenous languages, religions, and ways of knowing.

Yet the education provided by colonial institutions also became, paradoxically, a tool of anti-colonial resistance. Nationalist leaders across the colonized world—from Jawaharlal Nehru in India to Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana to Aimé Césaire in Martinique—had been educated in colonial or European institutions and used the analytical and rhetorical tools they acquired there to articulate powerful critiques of colonialism itself. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) drew on Western intellectual traditions to develop devastating analyses of colonial psychology and culture, illustrating the complex and often contradictory ways in which colonial education could be appropriated and turned against its original purposes.

Education in the Contemporary World Technology, Digital Learning, and New Inequalities

The emergence of the internet and digital technologies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has opened new possibilities for educational access and transformed the conditions of learning in ways that are still being worked out. Online platforms, open educational resources, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) have made it possible, in principle, for anyone with an internet connection to access high-quality educational content from leading universities and institutions around the world. Advocates of digital education argue that these technologies have the potential to democratize learning in ways that previous educational revolutions could not, making knowledge available to people regardless of their geographic location or financial resources (Selwyn, 2011).

In practice, however, the relationship between digital technology and educational equality has proved more complicated. The "digital divide"—the gap in access to digital technologies and internet connectivity between wealthy and poor communities, and between the global North and the global South—means that the potential benefits of digital learning are very unevenly distributed. The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced an abrupt shift to online learning across the world in 2020, starkly exposed these inequalities: students in wealthy districts with reliable internet access and personal devices continued their education while millions of children in poorer

communities fell further and further behind (UNICEF, 2021). Far from dissolving existing educational inequalities, digital technology has in many cases reproduced and amplified them.

Globalization, Privatization, and the Commercialization of Education

Globalization has also reshaped education in significant ways over the past several decades. The spread of neoliberal economic policies from the 1980s onward brought with it an increasing tendency to treat education as a market commodity rather than a public good—a shift reflected in the expansion of private schooling, the introduction of market mechanisms into public education systems, and the growing influence of international bodies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund over educational policy in developing countries (Robertson, 2005). Critics have argued that the commercialization of education undermines its potential as a vehicle of social change by subordinating educational goals to the imperatives of profit and labor market demand.

At the same time, global initiatives such as UNESCO's Education for All program and the inclusion of quality education as one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) reflect an ongoing international commitment to the idea of education as a universal right and a foundation of just and sustainable societies (UNESCO, 2015). These initiatives have achieved measurable progress in expanding access to primary education in many regions of the world, though significant challenges of quality, equity, and relevance remain. The tension between education as a public good and education as a market commodity remains one of the defining political contests of the contemporary period.

Critical Analysis

Education as Empowerment and as Social Control

The historical record examined in this chapter supports a complex and, in some respects, paradoxical conclusion: education is simultaneously one of the most powerful instruments of human liberation and one of the most effective mechanisms of social control. Its transformative potential is real. Access to literacy, critical thinking, and the accumulated knowledge of human civilization genuinely does expand the horizons of individuals and communities, enabling them to understand their circumstances more clearly, articulate their interests more effectively, and challenge unjust arrangements more forcefully. The historical evidence for this is substantial, from the reading circles of the early labor movement to the literacy campaigns of revolutionary Cuba to the role of historically Black colleges and universities in producing generations of African American leaders and scholars.

Yet the history of education is equally a history of exclusion, ideological imposition, and the reproduction of inequality. Throughout most of recorded history, formal education has been the preserve of elites, and the content of that education has typically reflected and reinforced the values and interests of those elites. Even as educational access has expanded, the quality and character of that education has remained deeply

differentiated along class, gender, racial, and national lines. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, in their influential study *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), argued that the structure of schooling in the United States systematically corresponded to the structure of the labor force, preparing working-class children for working-class jobs while preparing middle-class children for professional ones—not primarily through the explicit content of instruction but through the hidden curriculum of behavioral expectations and institutional practices.

This dual character of education—as both a vehicle of empowerment and an instrument of control—means that the relationship between education and social change cannot be read off from the mere expansion of schooling. The critical question is always: education of what kind, for whom, and controlled by whom? Education that cultivates critical consciousness, that centers the knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities, and that equips learners to understand and challenge the structures that shape their lives can genuinely contribute to progressive social transformation. Education that merely reproduces dominant ideologies and prepares learners for predetermined social positions tends to reinforce rather than disrupt existing power relations.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced the complex and evolving relationship between education and social change across more than two millennia of human history. From the philosophical academies of ancient Athens to the digital platforms of the twenty-first century, education has occupied a central place in human efforts to understand, sustain, and transform the societies in which people live. It has been a vehicle for the transmission of cultural values and a catalyst for their transformation, a means of social integration and a site of social struggle, an instrument of liberation and a mechanism of control.

Several broad patterns emerge from this historical survey. First, access to education has been one of the primary axes along which social inequalities have been organized and reproduced throughout history, and struggles for educational access have consistently been struggles for broader social inclusion and equality. Second, the content and purpose of education are always shaped by the social and political context in which it occurs, meaning that educational change is inseparable from political and economic change. Third, the expansion of educational access does not automatically translate into emancipatory social change; the character of the education provided matters as much as its availability.

Looking forward, the challenges facing education as a vehicle of social change are formidable. Digital inequalities, the commercialization of schooling, the persistence of gendered and racial disparities in educational outcomes, and the pressures of a rapidly changing labor market all pose serious obstacles to the realization of education's emancipatory potential. Yet the historical record also provides grounds for measured optimism. Human beings have, repeatedly and against considerable odds, used education as a tool for expanding their freedoms, challenging unjust arrangements, and imagining different

possible worlds. The continuing struggle to make education genuinely inclusive, critically engaged, and oriented toward human flourishing represents one of the most important political and intellectual projects of our time.

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