

Enlightenment Views on Education

Education was important to Enlightenment thinkers as a way to reach equality, though few included women in their plans. Perhaps surprisingly for a philosophe, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** had definite ideas about the harm caused certain kinds of education. Later, English writer **Mary Wollstonecraft** described an equal education for women as one of the important rights they were denied.

As you read the following two passages, think about your own ideas on education. Then on the second page of this handout, answer the questions that follow using complete sentences in your responses.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, 1750

From our very first years a senseless education adorns our mind and corrupts our judgement. Everywhere I see huge establishments in which young people are brought up at great expense to learn everything except their duties. Your children will not know their own language, but they will speak others which are nowhere in use; they will be able to compose Verses which they will hardly be able to understand; without being able to disentangle error from truth; but they will know the meaning of the words magnanimity (generosity), equity, temperance, humanity, courage.

I would as soon, said a Wise man, that my pupil had spent his time on the tennis court, at least his body would have been fitter for it. I know that children have to be kept busy, and that idleness is the danger most to be feared for them. What then should they learn? That is certainly a fine question! Let them learn what they ought to do when they are men, and not what they ought to forget.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792

Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinions that has carried all before it, and given a family character, as it were, to the century. It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education.

Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion is, such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form of the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women.

I must declare, what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weaker characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society.

Enlightenment Views on Education

Name: _____

1. What is Rousseau's basic criticism of the schools of his time?
2. According to Wollstonecraft, how have society and other writers, such as Rousseau, affected the way women are seen?
3. What kind of education do you think Rousseau would have designed? Could he and Wollstonecraft have agreed on some points of education?
4. Mary Wollstonecraft said that every era or century has a certain "family character" formed by public opinion. How would you describe the "family character" of the time you live in?

*Education leads to enlightenment
Enlightenment opens the way to empathy.
Empathy foreshadows reform.
- Derrick Bell*