

## Alternative education

**Alternative education**, also known as **non-traditional education** or **educational alternative**, includes a number of approaches to teaching and learning other than mainstream or traditional education. Educational alternatives are often rooted in various philosophies that are fundamentally different from those of mainstream or traditional education. While some have strong political, scholarly, or philosophical orientations, others are more informal associations of teachers and students dissatisfied with some aspect of mainstream or traditional education. Educational alternatives, which include charter schools, alternative schools, independent schools, and home-based learning vary widely, but often emphasize the value of small class size, close relationships between students and teachers, and a sense of community.

### Terminology

Alternative education refers to any type of education outside of the conventional standard, frequently referenced to the public school system, though in some contexts public schools use alternative approaches. Other words used in place of *alternative* by many educational professionals include *non-traditional*, *non-conventional*, or *non-standardized*, although these terms are used somewhat less frequently and may have negative connotations and multiple meanings. Those involved in forms of education which differ in their educational philosophy (as opposed to their intended pupil base) often use words such as *authentic*, *holistic*, and *progressive* as well. However, these words each have different meanings which are more specific or more ambiguous than the term *alternative*.

### Origins

While pedagogical controversy is very old, "alternative education" presupposes some kind of orthodoxy to which the alternative is opposed. In general, this limits the term to the last two or perhaps three centuries, with the rise of standardized and, later, compulsory education at the primary and secondary levels. Many critics in this period have suggested that the education of young people should be undertaken in radically different ways than ones in practice. In the 19th century, the Swiss humanitarian **Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi**; the American transcendentalists **Amos Bronson Alcott**, **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, and **Henry David Thoreau**; the founders of progressive education, **John Dewey** and **Francis Parker**; and educational pioneers, such as **Friedrich Fröbel**, **Maria Montessori** and **Rudolf Steiner** (founder of the Waldorf schools); among others, all insisted that education should be understood as the art of cultivating the moral, emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of the developing child. Anarchists such as **Leo Tolstoy** and **Francisco Ferrer y Guardia** emphasized education as a force for political liberation, secularism, and elimination of class distinctions. After World War II alternative approaches to early childhood education were developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy; this is known as the Reggio Emilia approach.

More recently, social critics such as John Caldwell Holt, Paul Goodman, Frederick Mayer, George Dennison and Ivan Illich have examined education from more individualist, anarchist,

and libertarian perspectives, that is, critiques of the ways that they feel conventional education subverts democracy by molding young people's understandings. Other writers, from the revolutionary Paulo Freire to American educators like Herbert Kohl and Jonathan Kozol, have criticized mainstream Western education from the viewpoint of their varied left-liberal and radical politics. The argument for an approach that caters more to the personal interest and learning style of each individual is supported by recent research that suggest that learner-responsible models prove to be more effective than the traditional teacher-responsible models. Ron Miller has identified five core elements common to many contemporary educational alternatives:

1. Respect for every person
2. Balance
3. Decentralization of authority
4. Noninterference between political, economic, and cultural spheres of society
5. A holistic worldview

### **Alternative school**

An alternative school is an educational establishment with a curriculum and methods that are nontraditional.

Many such schools were founded in the United States in the 1970s as an alternative to mainstream or traditional classroom structure. A wide range of philosophies and teaching methods are offered by alternative schools; some have strong political, scholarly, or philosophical orientations, while others are more *ad-hoc* assemblies of teachers and students dissatisfied with some aspect of mainstream or traditional education. In 2003 there were approximately 70 alternative schools in the United Kingdom. In the UK public funding is not available for alternative schools and therefore alternative schools are usually fee-paying institutions. In the USA an increasing number of public school systems are offering alternative streams (language immersion, Montessori, Waldorf), but the majority of alternative schools are still independent and thus without financial support from the government.