Joseph Lancaster Biography

Joseph Lancaster

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Biography

Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838) was the founder of the monitorial system of education and a pioneer of teacher education.

Joseph Lancaster was born in London on Nov. 25, 1778. He rejected his parents' plans for a ministerial career but brought a religious zeal to his education of the poor, the calling he chose shortly after becoming a Quaker.

In 1801 Lancaster founded an elementary school for the poor in London; it soon had a thousand boys. Unable to pay assistants, he devised the monitorial system--that is, he employed older students to teach the younger with rigid discipline, mechanical methods of drill and recitation, and an elaborate scheme of rewards and punishments. His *Improvements in Education* (1803) described this system in detail, including his efforts to encourage and train his best students to become schoolmasters. Because of these efforts he is recognized as a pioneer of teacher education in England, where traditionally teaching had been left to clergymen and impecunious young men.

The success of Lancaster's school and its unsectarian methods attracted the attention of the English nobility and the royal court but incurred the hostility of the Anglican Church, which wished to have the education of the poor under its religious guidance. However, his methods were adopted in 1812 by the Church-led National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor.

Thriftless, impulsive, and undisciplined, Lancaster allowed his school to flounder financially in 1808. A group of Quaker supporters paid his debts, rescued the school, and established the Royal Lancasterian Society in 1811 as a trust for its funds. Lancaster was grateful originally but soon began to chafe at the generosity and efficiency of his new trustees. Finally he sailed for America in 1818 to view the progress of his methods in schools in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. He established a school in Baltimore and in 1821 published a small book entitled *The Lancasterian System of Education,* largely a reprint of his first pamphlet with the addition of a petulant account of his chronic illness, poverty, and misfortune.

Lancaster sought recovery from an illness in the warmth of Caracas, Venezuela, where President Simón Bolívar had invited him during an earlier visit to observe a Lancasterian model school. When poverty dogged his steps even in South America, Lancaster returned to New York, where he died on Oct. 24, 1838, as a result of an accident.