

History: Unit 2  
Lesson 23 of 30

# How were people educated in Elizabethan society?



# Education in Elizabethan society

In the sixteenth century, many people believed that the fundamental purpose of education was to prepare people for their future roles in society.

Education was largely reflective of the social structure, and often only those from the upper classes of society could afford to give their children a formal education. Education was also different for boys and girls due to the different roles they were expected to perform in society.

However, ideas about education were changing during the reign of Elizabeth I. People called humanists believed that learning was important in its own right and should not just serve a practical purpose. They believed it was important to study the work of ancient philosophers to develop a better understanding of the world. Protestants also believed in the importance of education, especially in allowing people to read the Bible for themselves. These ideas are important in explaining the growth of education during the reign of Elizabeth I.



# Education for the nobility in Elizabethan England

During Elizabeth's reign, the **nobility** represented a small and powerful group of families. Many members of the nobility were courtiers and attended Elizabeth's court and often had positions of power within the government. The education of noble children largely reflected their social status and was designed to prepare them for a life at court. As it was before Elizabeth's reign, in the 16th century the education of noble children primarily took place at home.

Although boys and girls were often educated together, usually until the age of 7, their education heavily reflected their gender. Noble boys followed a traditional education, learning languages and other subjects such as history, philosophy, government and theology. They also participated in sports such as horse riding, archery, fencing and wrestling, all of which were believed to prepare them for a life as a nobleman. In contrast, noble girls followed an education that was more suited to perfecting their skills as noblewomen, learning how to play music, dance and sew, although like boys, they did also learn how to ride a horse.



# Education for the middling sorts in Elizabethan England

The biggest change in education in Elizabeth's reign was the development of the **Grammar school**. Grammar schools were established for boys from the **middling sorts**. These boys would start their education in a **petty school** aged 5-7 and then transition to grammar schools afterwards. 42 grammar schools had been set up by 1560. This meant that education for the upper classes was now also available outside the home although its purpose, to prepare boys for their future jobs, remained the same.

If you were from one of these wealthy families, you would have to pay fees in order to attend the grammar school. Although it was rare, boys from the lower classes who were considered intelligent enough could attend grammar schools if they received funding from a benefactor.

The education that boys received was designed to prepare them for university. They could be expected to learn languages such as Latin and Greek, study philosophy, learn arithmetic and participate in sports such as archery and wrestling. Some grammar schools were run specifically for the sons of **merchants** and **craftsmen**, but their education focused more on learning the practical skills they would need in these manual jobs. However, girls were not permitted to attend grammar schools. Some girls (from all classes) did attend schools called **Dame Schools** which were run by local women. The education provided there was basic and focused largely on preparing them for married life and running a household.



# Education for the poor in Elizabethan England

Although an increasing number of schools and universities were established in Elizabethan England, the majority of the population did not receive a formal education.

50% of the population in Elizabethan society were classified as the **labouring poor**. This group did not own property or land and relied on unskilled manual work for employment, which paid very little. If they became unemployed, they faced considerable hardship.

This group focused on learning what they needed in order to survive. For many children, this meant having to learn the skills necessary to start work in the family trade or in the home from a very early age so that they could help support the family. As a result, it was both practically and financially impossible for many of these families to send their children to school.

By 1603, it is estimated that around 30% of men and 10% of women were estimated to be **literate**. Although this was a slight increase from the 1530s when it was estimated that 20% of men and 10% of women were literate, this suggests that the majority of people in Elizabethan England still did not receive a formal education where they learnt to read and write. Formal education only really remained accessible to the most wealthy in Elizabethan society.



# The development of the Universities

In the reign of Elizabeth I boys from noble and upper class families were expected to attend university after completing their studies at **grammar school** or in the home. Boys could attend university from around the age of 14 or 15. The two universities that boys could attend in Elizabethan England were Oxford and Cambridge. At University, boys could be expected to learn traditional subjects such as Geometry, Music, Astronomy, Philosophy, Logic and Rhetoric, in addition to Medicine, Law and Divinity (religion). Some boys chose not to go to University, but to train as lawyers in the **Inns of Court** in London instead.

Universities had long been established before the reign of Elizabeth I. However, under Elizabeth they developed due to her commitment to improving the education of Protestant clergymen. In 1571, Elizabeth founded a new college at Oxford University called 'Jesus College'. In doing so, Elizabeth I hoped that it would be possible to encourage more Protestants to become clergymen and as a result, for Protestantism to spread across England.

Although in Elizabeth's reign young boys from noble families were expected to attend University, girls were not allowed to attend and were expected to spend their teenage years perfecting their abilities to be good noblewomen.



# How were people educated in Elizabethan society?

Social class	How were they educated? (both boys and girls)	Was this a change in Elizabethan England?
Nobility		
Middling sorts		
The poor		



# How were people educated in Elizabethan society?



Social class	What type of schooling was available to them (both boys and girls)	Was this a change in Elizabethan England?
<b>Nobility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For boys: Educated in the home in subjects that were designed to prepare them for their future roles as noblemen.</li> <li>For girls: Educated in the home in subjects that were designed to prepare them for their future roles as noblewomen.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was little change as boys and girls were taught the skills that were seen as appropriate for their gender.</li> </ul>
<b>Middling sorts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys from the middling sorts could attend grammar schools.</li> <li>Specialist grammar schools were set up to cater for the sons of merchants and craftsmen. These schools focused on the development of practical skills.</li> <li>Girls could not attend grammar schools.</li> <li>Boys from poorer backgrounds could attend grammar school with financial help.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was considerable change as more grammar schools were set up under Elizabeth I.</li> <li>This was little change because although there were more schools in Elizabethan England, education was still only really available for the wealthier groups in society.</li> <li>There was little change as grammar school education was not available to girls.</li> <li>Education in grammar schools, like that in the home still focused on preparing boys for their future roles.</li> </ul>
<b>The poor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most children of the labouring poor focused on skills they needed to support the family from an early age.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little change as the poor were often unable to send their children to school.</li> <li>There was some change as there was a slight improvement in literacy levels in Elizabethan England.</li> </ul>



# Comprehension questions

1. What was the purpose of education for children of the nobility?
2. How did education for the 'middling sorts' change in Elizabethan England?
3. Why was it rare for children of the labouring poor to have a formal education in Elizabethan society?
4. Why did Elizabeth I establish Jesus College at Oxford University?
5. **Challenge question:** Explain how education changed during the reign of Elizabeth I.

## **Challenge question sentence starters**

*One way in which education changed during the reign of Elizabeth I was...*

*This was a change in education because...*



# Extension Activity

6. To what extent did education improve during the reign of Elizabeth I?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>I believe that education improved to a (large, partial, small) extent during the reign of Elizabeth I...</i>	-Grammar schools
<i>One reason I believe this is because...</i>	- Universities
<i>Another reason I believe this is because...</i>	- Literacy rate
	- Labouring poor
	- Formal education
	- Nobility



# Glossary

**Nobility** - A small and powerful group of families who were often at Elizabeth court and had positions of power within the government.

**Grammar school** - Schools established in the 16th century that were attended by sons of middling families.

**Middling sorts** - Wealthy professionals such as business owners or landholders.

**Petty school** - Schools that were attended by the middling sorts until the ages of between 5-7.

**Merchants** - A professional who makes their income primarily through trade.

**Craftsmen**- A professional who makes their income through crafting materials.

**Labouring poor** - A group of people in society who did not own any land and relied on unskilled manual work for employment .

**Literate** - The ability to read and write

**Inns of Court** - Where men hoping to become lawyers in the 16th century would train.

**Dame Schools** - Schools where girls of all classes could go for a basic education that focused on preparing them for their future gender roles.

