

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL HOLIDAYS IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

The institutionalization of school holidays in Europe is intertwined with profound shifts in perceptions of time, learning, and childhood. This is a historical process that does not follow a linear trajectory of progress but is embedded within broader social, cultural, and scientific developments. Holidays were not simply established as breaks from the school process; over time, they acquired a recognized educational function, becoming a site of negotiation between labor, religious tradition, political regulation, and pedagogical thinking.

The primary aim of this article is to invite reflection on the role and function of time in education. The alternation between school time and breaks is a product of historical formation rather than self-evident practice. From the medieval religious conception of time to the modern structuring of the school calendar, holidays reflect not only the need for rest or organizational flexibility in program planning, but also the importance of out-of-school periods for the development of students' personalities and subjectivities.

The study examines how school holidays became an institutionalized practice, tracing the shift from religious observances to labor demands, and ultimately to their integration into European educational policy. The path toward the institutionalization of school holidays reveals how education systems have been shaped around the management of time, linking the significance of breaks with the processes of learning and the child's experience. Pedagogical and sociological theories on time management, along with broader social developments, highlight the profound changes in the understanding of breaks as an educational tool and its relationship to contemporary educational frameworks. This historical trajectory illustrates the complex relationship between holidays, labor, and social development, and how this relationship has been incorporated into the social needs and organizational structure of education.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The concept of school holidays, as a historical and socio-political phenomenon, is inextricably linked to the evolution of educational systems and the social structure of each historical period. In the history of education, school holidays were not always a given, but rather emerged as the outcome of specific political, social, and religious conditions. The institutionalization of school holidays at the European level was gradual, taking different forms and intensities across historical eras.

During the Middle Ages, education was closely tied to religious institutions, particularly monasteries and episcopal schools, where teaching primarily served religious purposes and was

limited to the upper social classes. The regulation of time for learning and rest did not follow a fixed school calendar but was instead aligned with major religious festivals and the seasonal demands of agricultural production. Time for education was dictated by the liturgical and agrarian calendar, with pauses coinciding with major celebrations or labor-intensive periods such as harvest time (Raftery, 2012). Educational time lacked autonomous pedagogical organization and was embedded within the broader cycle of religious life and rural economy. Holidays functioned more as interruptions imposed by the ecclesiastical calendar or agricultural tasks rather than as planned pedagogical arrangements. The absence of institutional concern for students' free time highlights the limited scope of education, which primarily addressed members of the clergy and the upper social strata. The alignment of school time with the rhythms of social and religious life reveals the inability of the educational institution at that time to establish autonomy from dominant non-educational structures (Lynch, 2021).

In the early modern period, education began to acquire a more structured form, though it remained largely religious in character. Gradually, it transitioned from being the exclusive domain of religious institutions to becoming a more institutionalized and socially recognized function. School breaks, which had until then adhered strictly to the ecclesiastical calendar, began to exhibit limited elements of normative organization. In monastic schools and early universities, educational activity was still governed by the needs of the Church and the prevailing social hierarchy, with holidays closely tied to the religious and agricultural cycles of life. Interruptions in learning, where they occurred, continued to follow the ecclesiastical calendar and the rhythms of agricultural work, especially in rural areas where education remained sporadic and subject to the seasonal needs of the community (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Educational processes were frequently interrupted due to lack of resources, accessibility issues, or external factors such as natural disasters. The absence of organized educational infrastructure rendered it impossible to plan for scheduled school breaks. Holidays were not the result of pedagogical planning, but rather a necessary outcome of the social and natural conditions that shaped the unstable nature of learning.

The introduction of "school time" as an organized structure, including holidays as a component of the educational process, only began to develop with the emergence of modern education systems. With the socio-economic transformations of the 19th and 20th centuries, national education systems expanded and became integrated into modern societies. Education started to reach broader segments of the population, and holidays were established as an integral part of the school year. Students required time for rest and for processing what they had learned, making holidays an essential aspect of the learning process (Leaton Gray, 2017). The integration of holidays into the educational program, as well as their alignment with broader social and political time regulations, reflects a gradual change in the perception of time in education. This slow adaptation highlights the importance of balancing learning and rest according to the social needs and demands of the era (Ballantine, 2011).

This analysis focuses on the historical trajectory of structural changes in education while simultaneously addressing the social and political dimensions of school holidays. Linking pedagogical theories to the function of school holidays reveals the deeper interplay between educational practices and broader social, political, and economic parameters. School holidays, as an institution, do not simply arise from a need for rest or from arbitrary events, but result from complex processes involving the structure of society and the political management of the

educational system. Embedded within the educational framework, holidays are not mere intermissions; they are connected to how society perceives the distinction between school and non-school life, and to the criteria for organizing the learning process. Shifts in the socio-political context, such as economic crises or evolving social needs, shape how holidays are integrated into the broader educational framework, directly influencing the organization of school time and pedagogical strategies.

2.0 ECCLESIASTICAL REGULATION AND THE LACK OF PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSION

The structuring of school time during the Middle Ages and the early modern period was primarily shaped by the operation of ecclesiastical institutions and their hegemonic influence over the organization of the educational process. School holidays, as we know them today in modern state education systems, did not exist as an independent pedagogical institution. Rather, they appeared as periodic interruptions aligned with the religious calendar and tailored to the needs of society of the time. These breaks followed the liturgical calendar of the Church, as education was directly dependent on the religious cycles and their rhythms. Celebrations such as Easter, Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and various saints' feast days marked the cessation of instruction, without being accompanied by any pedagogical reflection on the significance of these pauses (Le Goff, 1980; Courtenay, Miethke & Priest, 2000).

Since the Church dominated knowledge management, educational activity took place in spaces whose primary aim was not the systematic transmission of knowledge in pedagogical terms, but rather catechism, scriptural interpretation, and the consolidation of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Monastic and cathedral schools of the late Middle Ages primarily served to educate clergy and members of the upper social classes. Education was dictated by the monastery's schedule, rather than by an autonomous educational rhythm. Thus, breaks in school activity coincided with liturgical needs, agricultural cycles (such as harvest), or travel constraints, and were not integrated into a unified school calendar, confirming the lack of pedagogical intent behind these pauses (Southern, 1995; Cobban, 1975).

The education system of the Middle Ages was narrow in scope and highly exclusive, aimed primarily at the upper classes and structured around prevailing religious norms. Access to learning was a privilege, both due to the social hierarchy and the monopoly of Latin as the language of instruction, which further excluded the lower classes (Illich, 1971). The concept of "school time" had not yet crystallized, and educational breaks lacked any consideration of students' mental, physical, or cognitive rest. Time management during the Middle Ages was governed by religious rules and recurring periods that upheld the theological cycle of feasts and liturgies. In contrast, modern educational systems have developed a more practical and functional understanding of time, with a focus on efficiency and organized learning (Descombes, 1989).

At the same time, in the early modern period, with the establishment of the first universities such as those in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford, initial steps were taken toward the institutional structuring of educational breaks. Universities scheduled class interruptions during the summer and winter months, primarily due to seasonal limitations or the difficulties students faced in traveling, rather than as part of a deliberate pedagogical plan or rationale (Pedersen, 1997). These breaks were often arbitrary or dependent on institutional infrastructure and financial

capacity. Nevertheless, the concept of holidays as necessary pedagogical respite was still absent. Attention remained focused on theological and legal instruction, with little regard for the holistic development of the student as a person.

The prevailing perception of time, as shaped by the Church and early universities, remained tethered to religious and liturgical regulation. There was no reflective approach to the possibility of a pedagogically structured school year, nor any recognition of the importance of breaks for students' psychological and physical well-being. This absence underscores the lack of a coherent anthropological model of education at that time.

The transition toward a more systematic conception of school time and holidays would come much later, when the socio-political transformations of emerging nation-states and the rise of mass schooling necessitated the temporal organization of the educational experience. Holidays, as an essential component of pedagogical rhythm, would then come to the forefront not as extensions of ecclesiastical pauses, but as outcomes of institutional regulation.

3.0 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION: HOLIDAYS AS A NEED FOR LABOR AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The emergence of the Industrial Age brought about a radical transformation of social structures and of humanity's relationship with time, with direct consequences for the configuration of the school year and the institutionalization of holidays. Labor, now redefined through the factory system, became the dominant structuring principle of daily life, shaping not only the productive roles of adults but also the place of children within the social and economic system. The gradual introduction of compulsory education, from the second half of the 19th century onwards, was closely tied to the state's need to control, organize, and orient the future workforce in line with the demands of industrial production (Anderson, 1995; Giddens, 1987).

During this period, the concept of school holidays did not derive its meaning from pedagogical or psychological assumptions, but from the functional needs of the agrarian and industrial landscape. The most widespread form of holiday was the summer break, designed to enable children's participation in the harvest of agricultural produce. The school break did not yet incorporate concerns about rest or rhythmical variation but rather reflected the economic necessity of utilizing child labor during crucial periods of the year (Vincent, 1991). Similar was the function of winter breaks in regions with intensive artisanal or seasonal activity.

The structuring of the school year was an outcome of the social and technical conditions of the time, with the state taking on a central role in establishing and organizing a standardized educational calendar. Unlike in the Middle Ages, when educational time was determined by the Church or local communities, the industrial era introduced the necessity of unifying school time on a national scale to serve state planning and population management. The first state regulations concerning compulsory schooling, such as the 1870 Education Act in the United Kingdom and similar legislation in Germany and France, introduced a new paradigm of controlling children's time through the establishment of an annual schedule with fixed start and end dates, along with designated breaks (Green, 1990).

The institutional recognition of the children's right, or obligation, to be absent from school for specific periods was not initially aimed at protecting childhood. Rather, it served to balance the

demands of social engineering, which required both education and labor. Especially in rural areas, summer holidays were scheduled in alignment with the agricultural cycle, as is evident in 19th-century legislative documents from various European states (Tröhler, Popkewitz, & Labaree, 2011).

The progressive decline of child labor, the legislation for the protection of minors, and the establishment of schooling as a privileged space for socialization contributed to a reevaluation of the function of school holidays. As the state strengthened its role as the central regulator of school time, holiday periods were gradually transformed from economically driven interruptions into institutionally guaranteed times of removal from the school environment. The unification of school holidays and the implementation of a standardized calendar marked significant steps toward the normalization of educational time (Kidd, 1999).

The very notion of school changed during this period, from a local or religious institution to a state-administered structure integrated into the broader function of the nation-state. School holidays, now situated within this national framework, ceased to be fragmented local customs and became state-regulated structures with features of continuity and repetition, serving both educational practice and social control. The expansion of compulsory education accompanied this transformation, establishing a new approach to the temporal organization of learning.

The Industrial Age not only signaled a technical and productive shift in society but also marked a transformative moment in how time is conceptualized in education. The emergence of school holidays as a tool of social engineering and national planning represents a fundamental turning point in the configuration of modern educational time.

4.0 POST-WAR 20th CENTURY: PEDAGOGICAL LEGITIMIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RECOGNITION OF HOLIDAYS

In the post-war 20th century, school holidays began to acquire a new meaning, moving away from the logic of utilizing child labor and orienting toward supporting the child's psycho-physical development. The gradual recognition of the child as an autonomous subject, rather than as an incomplete adult, was one of the century's most decisive shifts, with substantial implications for the structuring of school time. Childhood was increasingly seen as a distinct phase of human life, with its own needs, rhythms, and protective mechanisms (Ariès, 1962).

The pedagogical theories that emerged and prevailed during the 20th century provided strong foundations for recognizing school holidays as a beneficial and necessary practice. John Dewey emphasized the child's need to interact with the environment beyond the classroom, focusing on experiential knowledge and social learning (Dewey, 1938). Célestin Freinet (1993) highlighted the importance of creative expression and experiential learning rhythms, while Maria Montessori established the idea of the child's internal psychological readiness for learning, demonstrating the necessity of rest, calmness, and free activity as prerequisites for cognitive development (Montessori, 1995). From the perspective of these theories, holidays were no longer seen as externally imposed breaks, but as an organic part of a dialectical relationship between rest and active learning.

At the same time, the welfare states formed in Western Europe after 1945 reinforced the role of school holidays not only as an educational tool but also as a public health and social measure.

Through the establishment of public health systems and the elevation of the school's role as a protective institution, the child came to be seen not only as a recipient of education but also of rest, recreation, and well-being. School holidays became associated with the prevention of fatigue, the promotion of physical and mental health, and the maintenance of social balance. The example of "open-air schools" (*écoles de plein air* in French or open-air schools in English), which first emerged in France, Germany, and Switzerland in the early 20th century, gained greater traction in the post-war design of child welfare policies (Heywood, 2001; Eyre, 1973).

Emphasis was placed on the development of organized leisure during school holidays, as part of municipal and state recreational policies. Summer camps, creative activity centers, and cultural programs were designed to offer alternative forms of socialization, learning, and relaxation, reinforcing the idea that childhood development extends beyond the classroom. Freedom was no longer defined as the absence of obligations but as a condition enabling spontaneous creativity and participation in non-coercive activities (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003).

The concept of holidays gradually became integrated into a broader understanding of childhood, in which psychological, pedagogical, and social perspectives converge to frame the child as a subject with needs that go beyond academic performance. Holidays came to be seen not simply as a pause, but as an integral part of both learning and developmental processes. The pedagogical foundation of holidays was tied to the recognition of learning rhythms, the necessity of relief from the demands of formal education, and the importance of the child's experiential engagement with the world. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget and later Jerome Bruner emphasized the value of active participation and discovery learning, as opposed to knowledge overload and rigid cognitivism (Piaget, 1970; Bruner, 1966). In this light, holidays functioned as a space for balance, curiosity cultivation, and the promotion of children's autonomy.

The post-war period radically reshaped the meaning of school holidays, embedding them within a network of ideas that included pedagogical science, welfare policies, and new psychological interpretations of childhood. Holidays came to be recognized as an institutional necessity, not merely as a time away from school, but as a condition of active care for the child. The distinction between school and non-school time took on a positive significance, driven by the needs of development, psychological balance, and social participation.

5.0 CONTEMPORARY RECONFIGURATIONS: EUROPEAN POLICIES, CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATIONS, AND THE INDIVIDUAL AT THE CENTER

In recent decades, the concept of school holidays has been redefined considering contemporary social, technological, and cultural transformations. European and international institutions such as the European Union and UNESCO are actively contributing to a rethinking of school time by promoting more flexible and participatory educational approaches. Through the EU's "Education and Training 2020" strategy and more recent guidelines under the European Education Area framework, policies are being shaped that incorporate student well-being and quality of life into educational planning (European Commission, 2020). UNESCO, for its part, emphasizes the need to create inclusive and learner-centered schools, which do not focus solely on knowledge transmission, but also promote the holistic development of the child by

providing an environment in which all students—regardless of gender, race, social or economic status, or other differences, have equal opportunities for learning and participation.

Inclusive schools foster acceptance and respect for differences, cultivating a culture of solidarity and cooperation where diversity is viewed as a resource rather than an obstacle. Learner-centered schools focus on the development of students as active and autonomous participants in the learning process, encouraging the creation of pedagogical frameworks that address each student's needs, interests, and abilities. Within this approach, school time is utilized not only to promote academic knowledge but also to cultivate emotional, social, and psychological skills essential for holistic development (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021).

Simultaneously, school holidays are taking on a distinctly cultural character, with each country shaping its own calendar according to national, religious, and social specificities. In France, for example, the school year is divided into shorter, more frequent breaks (approximately every six weeks) to prevent student burnout and support family life. In Germany, the federal structure of the educational system allows for different schedules across states (Länder), which also serves tourism-related needs by preventing infrastructure overload. The tourism industry plays a significant role in determining the timing of school holidays, especially in southern countries (e.g., Italy, Spain, Greece), where climatic conditions, such as extreme summer heat, necessitate extended summer breaks. The tourist season often coincides with the need for rest due to challenging weather, influencing holiday organization in ways that align tourism demands with educational processes (Prøitz, Aasen, & Wermke, 2023).

The digital transformation of education has introduced new possibilities for organizing school time, shifting focus from strictly calendrical scheduling toward more flexible learning models. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the adaptability of remote learning and the need to reform traditional forms of school organization. Some European education systems have proposed models featuring staggered school years or intensive learning periods followed by rest phases. The notion of flexible school time is also gradually emerging, allowing students to integrate learning creatively into their daily lives (OECD, 2022). Although such practices have not yet become widespread, they signal a shift toward individualized forms of education that entail different types of breaks, no longer necessarily linked to a complete cessation of educational activity, but rather to its reconfiguration.

In this context, the issue of free time has become central to educational discourse. Free time is no longer viewed simply as a pause from schoolwork, but as a space for skill development, creativity, and the strengthening of students' psychological resilience. Modern approaches to well-being in education incorporate factors such as emotional security, social participation, and access to experiences beyond the formal curriculum (Seligman et al., 2009; Huppert & So, 2013). The well-being of students, understood as a synthesis of psychological balance and social integration, is a key goal of the new structuring of school time.

Today's policy reforms are not merely technical adjustments to the school calendar, but part of a broader shift in the relationship between student and school. The child is increasingly seen as an active agent in shaping their learning rhythm, with holidays framed within a context of self-care, relief, and creative re-engagement with knowledge. The diversity of national practices

reflects not only cultural differences in how school time is understood, but also the ongoing negotiation between global policy directions and local needs.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS- A CRITICAL REVIEW

The development of school holidays reflects deeper transformations in the organization of society, in perceptions of childhood, and in the role of the school. From their origins, when they were tied to agricultural and labor cycles as necessary interruptions, to modern approaches linking them to quality of life, mental well-being, and the holistic development of the child, school holidays are part of a continuous transformation in the educational meaning and student experience.

The post-war recognition of the child as an autonomous subject marked a profound shift in the understanding of childhood. The theories of Dewey (1938), Montessori (1995), and Freinet (1993) reinforced the gradual turn of pedagogical interest toward the child's everyday experience, both within and beyond the school environment. Within this new value and pedagogical framework, holidays gained meaning not merely as rest from the learning process, but also as a space for personal empowerment and social engagement.

Throughout the 20th century, the association of school holidays with public health, social welfare, and psychological support policies was significantly strengthened by targeted state interventions. The establishment of summer camps, the organization of creative leisure activities, and the proposals for school calendars aligned with children's developmental needs were part of a broader effort to redefine childhood as a period of care, empowerment, and institutional protection. As early as the 1950s, UNESCO recognized child well-being as a fundamental component of educational policy and promoted its inclusion in international education planning programs (UNESCO, 1952).

In the 21st century, the concept of school time is being redefined considering new educational, social, and technological challenges. The dynamic incorporation of digital technology into education, the proliferation of hybrid learning models, and the growing demand for differentiated and personalized learning paths have underscored the need to reconsider the structure and timing of the school year. In some EU countries, experimental models based on the periodic alternation of learning and rest periods or the distribution of shorter, fragmented breaks throughout the year are being implemented. These interventions aim to enhance cognitive performance, reduce educational stress, and support students' emotional balance, considering the diverse needs of an ever-changing child population (European Commission, 2020).

At the same time, cultural and geographical differences among European countries highlight the complex interplay of traditional practices, climatic conditions, and economic factors, such as tourism, in shaping the school calendar. In Scandinavian countries, winter holidays are organically embedded in a cultural framework that promotes contact with nature and the use of snow as a medium for recreation and education. In contrast, Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece emphasize longer summer holidays, a pattern influenced by both high summer temperatures and the needs of the tourism industry, which subtly shape the timing of school breaks. Thus, the school calendar ceases to be a uniform administrative template and instead becomes an adaptable structure that reflects local social and environmental realities.

In this evolving educational landscape, leisure time acquires new significance. School holidays are no longer simply a suspension of instruction, but emerge as a time for cultivating creativity, self-regulation, and social connections, contributing to a more human-centered and holistic vision of learning.

Notably, in the contemporary European context, the dialogue around redefining the relationship between school and life remains vibrant, not only as an administrative or pedagogical challenge but also as an anthropological question. The emphasis on “well-being”, as highlighted in European educational strategies (Chircop, 2021), expresses a shift from viewing school merely as a space for knowledge transmission to one that recognizes childhood as an autonomous stage of life, with needs for mental balance, creative experience, and meaningful participation in the learning process.

The concept of school holidays, as revealed through both historical evolution and current pedagogical thinking, is shaped by social, cultural, and educational values that determine how societies perceive the child and time. Holidays are not simply a break from learning; they are a space for rethinking the very role of the school in shaping the human subject that not only consumes knowledge but also lays the foundation for its holistic development. The way time is experienced within and outside school, from learning to rest, shapes childhood and reveals the educational philosophy underlying the school calendar. The quality of childhood experience, therefore, cannot be measured solely by the content taught, but also by the dynamics of time as a medium for decompression, recharging, and personal growth. Looking ahead, a reevaluation of school time, through the lens of new technological and pedagogical challenges, may lead to a new model in which time is no longer rigidly divided between learning and rest, but becomes an open space where knowledge, creativity, and well-being meet.

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