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Commentary

John Locke: An Education Progressive Ahead of His Time?



How a 17th-Century Philosopher Speaks to Today's School Reformers

By Peter Gibbon

Concerned about the moral laxity of Restoration England, the wealthy landowner and politician Edward Clarke turned to his lifelong friend John Locke for advice about how to raise his son. Out of a series of letters to Clarke came *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693.

We know John Locke today as a social and political philosopher. In his "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," he famously characterized the human mind at birth as a "blank slate." Less known today is Locke as an educational philosopher; yet, his published letters to Clarke became the most celebrated treatise on education during the Enlightenment, influencing Benjamin Franklin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and untold numbers of anxious parents and uncertain teachers.

Drawing on Locke's experience as a physician, psychologist, diplomat, and political adviser, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* is part medical manual, part guide for parents and teachers, and overall a meditation on motivation and human nature. Radical for its time, the book prefigures many of today's educational debates.

In a world that considered children miniature adults, Locke discovered the child:

"Children are strangers to all we are acquainted with." They must play. Their minds wander. They need to be busy, and they love change and variety. They are naturally curious. To motivate, the skillful teacher simplifies lessons, sympathetically answers naïve questions, seizes the moment when the child is "in tune," engaged, and responsive.

Anticipating Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Locke further urges parents and tutors to be aware of individual differences. Not only minds but also temperaments differ. Lacking the advantage of contemporary theories of inheritance, Locke relied on close observation: "Some men by the unalterable frame of their constitution are stout, others timorous, some confident, others modest, tractable or obstinate, curious or careless, quick or slow."

In Locke's book, the mind is not a blank slate. Repeatedly, he celebrates the importance of education. Simultaneously, he concedes the importance of temperament. He would sympathize with Susan Cain's contemporary bestseller, *Quiet*, that suggests we are shaped in the womb and have less autonomy than we believe.

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John Locke's 1693 look at education is contemporary in its advice for motivating students: Cherish curiosity, gently rub away innocence, spare the rod, secure attention, provide recreation, treat children as rational, and explain the purpose of instruction. Speaking for all progressive educators, he muses, "I always have had a fancy that learning might be made a play and recreation to children."

Of course, fancy must be tempered by reality. The book simultaneously calls for encouraging self-control, implementing a love of reason, instilling virtue, and utilizing disgrace, as well as praise, as a motivator. A friend to traditionalists as well as to progressives, Locke extols the

importance of example and the power of habit. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* appealed to parents and teachers because Locke was concrete, practical, moderate, and balanced.

A founder of the Enlightenment, Locke believed in human potential and progress. Echoing proponents of contemporary positive psychology, he states: "We are born with faculties and powers capable of almost anything." At the same time, he is a realist, even a bit of an evolutionary psychologist. Sin and a Stone Age brain war with virtue and reason. We are "vain and proud creatures" in love with power and dominion. Children may be charming, but they can also be mischievous, cruel, listless, and lazy. From the cradle, they are covetous. Locke was particularly skeptical of the notion that peers teach each other valuable lessons. Schoolboys do not learn "justice, generosity, and sobriety" from one another, he advised. Instead, they are instructed in "well-laid plots of robbing an orchard together."

In a world amused by bear-baiting, Locke is a proponent of humanitarianism. Surrounded by violence and cruelty, he casts doubt on the upper-class preoccupation with hunting and fencing. He urges kindness. Children should not be whipped. At home, they should not be allowed to torment "young birds, butterflies, and such other poor animals which fall into their hands." In school, they should not be taught that conquerors are heroes or that slaughter is laudable.

The book was also revolutionary in its pedagogical detail: Use lettered blocks to teach reading, learn Latin through conversation, link history to geography, don't stuff young scholars with too much at a time, proceed by slow and gentle steps. For young aristocrats careless with money, he advises accounting. To balance out the long hours of grueling school classes, he advocates equal amounts of recreation.

In a 17th-century tribute to environmentalism, Locke says, "I think people should be accustomed from their cradles to be tender to all sensible creatures, and to spoil or waste nothing at all," a particularly impressive observation in a century decimated by scarcity, cruelty, and civil and religious wars.

In Locke's version of home schooling, mothers and fathers are essential. "Make them in love with the company of their parents," he says of children. Be kind. Praise freely. Take them into your confidence, but don't tolerate whining, dishonesty, selfishness, affectation. Mothers should not coddle. Fathers should allow fear to ripen into friendship.

Equally important was the influence of tutors. In advice relevant to current debates about teachers, he states that tutors should be smart and sophisticated, knowledgeable about content and pedagogy. Tutors should know not only subjects but also the outside world, combining tact and judgment with character. If you want highly qualified teachers, Locke says, select them carefully and pay them well.

In his book, Locke acknowledges that he does not have all the answers, such as how to motivate the listless student or how to extirpate "sauntering" (17th-century parlance for "hanging out"). There is little mention of art and music. Living in a patriarchal, aristocratic society, he has little advice for women and poor people. He could not envision the importance of a public school in a democracy.

But Locke is important because he rebelled against an educational system he thought cruel and stupid. He offered practical, humane alternatives to parents who were at "a loss how to breed their children." Without monographs or psychological research he anticipates so much: multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, behaviorism, and vocational education—and long before the educational jeremiads of our time, such as "A Nation at Risk," he connected a flourishing educational system to a country's security and prosperity.

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