

Natural Instinct

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In the sixteenth century, the French philosopher Michel Eyquem de Montaigne wrote influential essays on many topics, one of the most well-known being about education. In “Of the Education of Children,” Montaigne outlines the important qualities of a good tutor, the most successful ways to educate children, and the most important facets of education (235). Although his essay is detailed and thorough, he leaves out an important aspect of education, about which other authors during later times have written. The importance of nature is missing in Montaigne’s work even though he somewhat skims the surface of the topic at certain points throughout his essay. Transcendentalist authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom were influenced by Montaigne, pick up where his work left off and discuss the importance of the natural world and its pertinence to education. Nature, in both a literal and figurative sense, constitutes an incredibly important part of education and of human development. The slow disappearance in public schools of educational activities focusing on the natural world (because the students have to cover a lot of material to prepare for their standardized tests) has detrimental effects on students (Louv). Clearly, Montaigne, as insightful as his views on education are, left out one of the most vital parts.

Montaigne writes that one of the most important aspects of education is to learn about mankind and human nature, but that is the extent of his argument:

But whoever considers as in a painting the great picture of our mother Nature in her full majesty; whoever reads such universal and constant variety in her face; whoever finds himself there, and not merely himself, but a whole kingdom, as a

dot made with a very fine brush; that man alone estimates things according to their true proportions... (241)

It is evident that Montaigne lightly touches upon the subject of nature, but he does not delve into it as deeply as he does other topics, such as the role of tutors, studies abroad, and physical education.

Years later in the nineteenth century, the famous Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson devoted his life to studying the importance of nature in a philosophical, spiritual, and educational sense. Transcendentalism involves exploring “the soul’s connection with nature” and the spiritual journey the soul takes to find true meaning in life (Jacobus 248). One of Emerson’s essays, “On Education,” outlines educational benefits for children, much like Montaigne did three hundred years earlier. Unlike Montaigne, however, Emerson goes into great detail regarding nature and its effects on children, spiritually and emotionally. He writes about the “natural method” in educating children, which means letting them learn on their own without the teachers perverting their thoughts or interfering with their education too greatly. An example of Emerson’s approach would be to let a child go outside and to ask questions about trees or butterflies, without being lectured first. This approach capitalizes on children’s natural curiosity, but a student must be put in the proper settings first for it to work. If a child is always inside a classroom taking notes about nature and not experiencing it firsthand, the lesson becomes useless.

Emerson would shudder at the thought of modern schools where true educational experiences have been stripped away by the focus on memorization, tests, and watered-down information. He would also be upset that schools have now taken away recess privileges for children, especially the younger ones (Louv). Depriving students of experiences in the natural

world has proven to be extremely detrimental to their educational development. The natural growth process has been taken out of education and has been replaced mostly with ineffective lesson plans that do not stimulate the brain or soul to do any sort of critical thinking.

Another Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, wrote even more extensively about the natural world and was one of the first environmentalists in American history. Although his work *Walden* outlines the beauty of being close to nature, its most important theme is the idea of simple living. Materialism has been a problem with civilization since the beginning of time, and its grip on people has never assuaged. Thoreau took a drastic measure by leaving civilization, much like other great thinkers, such as Siddhartha Buddha, have done. Thoreau would be loath to realize that public schools in America have gone so far as to take recess away from children and to replace valuable time for exploring the world with homework and tests (Louv). Thoreau was not against schools or testing, by any means; however, the emphasis in today's educational institutions is much different from what it was during Thoreau's time. He would rather have a student go outside and climb a tree and then read about it, instead of reading about trees but never having any firsthand experience of them.

Richard Louv, a modern-day Transcendentalist and Naturalist, has written several books on the harmful effects children feel when experiences in the natural world are taken out of the curriculum (Louv). In fact, Louv believes so strongly in the importance of nature in schools that he has started a campaign, "The Children and Nature Network," an organization aimed at getting kids involved in the outdoors (Louv). Because of the current emphasis on standardized tests and instructional time, the Network has not made huge progress in the field of public education, but it has done well in private and independent schools. Emerson and Thoreau would be glad to know that someone in twenty-first-century America cares enough about the beneficial aspects of nature

for children to start a project devoted to it. Even if The Children and Nature Network does not catch on quickly, the few children who benefit from this campaign will be very much enlightened.

Because of the contributions of writers like Montaigne, Emerson, and Thoreau, it is evident that educational practices have changed over the centuries, but the changes have not always been for the best. The current emphasis on tests, memorization, and meaningless lectures is not providing students with authentic education. Today's educators should be wary of the direction in which they are headed because they are not necessarily producing better or smarter students. Replacing natural learning habits and instinctual curiosity with study guides and worksheets is not beneficial to the children. A large part of education is the human development that goes along with it, and many schools right now are hindering critical thinking, instead of encouraging it through firsthand experience of the natural world. More people like Richard Louv should stand up to current educators to try to turn educational practices around. Even though Montaigne wrote about many important educational issues during his time, he really left out one of the most important: nature. However, when his work is combined with that of Emerson, Thoreau, Louv, and many other writers, it is possible to find the right path to education and enlightenment regarding nature and its benefits. Unfortunately, while public schools continue not to take Thoreau and Emerson's work into account, many children's education will suffer.

Works Cited

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