

NATURE and the NEW EDUCATION

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That there are hidden forces at work modifying the old order of education has been apparent for some time to those who have explored beneath the surface of modern life. I firmly believe that these forces are the result of a great evolutionary advancement in the ideals of humanity and, being based upon the elementary laws of nature will result in the betterment of the world.

But let me point out a fact which should give all who possess educational ideas or ideals, good reason to pause before outlining their schemes to the public. Such schemes, containing suggestions, which would be applicable today, and might with advantage be incorporated into our own system of education, have been placed before the public, and been within the cognizance of educators, for two thousand years. I need only refer you to Plato's theory of education as developed in his Republic. I will quote a few of his precepts, some of which our system of education has embodied, or is supposed to embody.

"People are born with special and individual faculties. Each should confine himself to the work he is most fitted to perform, and his education should be of such a character as best to fit him for his vocation in life."

"The child should be set to imitate only what is honorable and just, for thus right habits are formed and become a second nature."

"All his surroundings should be of correct and harmonious form and design. For then he will become imbued with a desire for the good, a taste for the beautiful and a dislike for their opposites. The training of the mind should end in the love of the beautiful."

"If any faculty of the mind be left uncultivated it will become stunted or atrophied."

"All children should not be submitted to a uniform education except up to a certain point. This point should be where the particular aptitudes and capacities of the child become manifest."

"Deference to their elders and obedience to their parents should be inculcated."

"A good education and not legal enactments will produce law-abiding citizens."

"An effective education will leave indelible impressions; the storms of life cannot efface them."

"Men having the best education will possess simple and moderate desires."

"There should be higher than a utilitarian motive in the selection of subjects for study."

"Study ought to be made a pleasure to children, not a task. If made compulsory, it is ineffectual and evanescent."

These ideas on education were conceived and expressed by a pagan who lived 2300 years ago.

I should like to emphasize two or three of these maxims of Plato.

"People are born with special and individual faculties. Each should confine himself to the work he is most fitted to perform and his education should be of such a character as best to fit him for his vocation in life."

We all agree to the truth here expressed; and yet our modern educational system has failed to devise a means of putting these ideas into effect. Occasionally you will meet with these thoughts in recent literature on education, put forward as new and original. The same may be said of the two following maxims:

"All children should not be submitted to a uniform education except up to a certain point. This point

should be where the particular aptitudes and capacities of the child become manifest."

"Study ought to be made a pleasure to children, not a task. If made compulsory it is ineffectual and evanescent."

If proper force and effect were given to these three principles of education as laid down by Plato, our school system would approach as near perfection as under existing social conditions we can hope to bring it. And yet for over two thousand years that ideal has been before the eyes of the world.

The next authority I should like to quote is Montaigne, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare. He says:

"The greatest and most important difficulty of human science is the education of children."

"For not having chosen the right course we often take very great pains and consume a good part of our time in training up children to things for which by their natural constitution they are totally unfit."

"Such as, according to our common way of teaching undertake with one and the same lesson, and the same measure of direction, to instruct several boys of differing and unequal capacities, are infinitely mistaken; and 'tis no wonder, if in a whole multitude of scholars, there are not found alone two or three who bring away any good account of their time and discipline. Let the master judge of the profit the pupil has made, not by the testimony of his memory, but by that of his life."

"To know by rote is no knowledge, and signifies no more but only to retain what one has intrusted to our memory. A mere bookish learning is a poor, paltry learning; it may serve for ornament, but there is yet no foundation for any superstructure to be built upon it."

"Whoever shall represent to his fancy, as in a picture that great image of our mother nature, in her full majesty and lustre, whoever in her face shall read so general and so constant a variety, whoever shall observe himself in that figure no bigger than the least touch or prick of a pencil in comparison of the whole, that man alone is able to value things according to their true estimate and grandeur. This great world is the mirror wherein we are to behold ourselves. In short I would have this to be the book my young gentleman should study with the most attention."

"As the steps we take in walking to and fro in a gallery though three times as many, do not tire a man so much as those we employ in a formal journey, so our lesson, as it were accidentally occurring, without any set obligation of time or place, and falling naturally into every action, will insensibly insinuate itself. By this means our very exercises and recreations, running, wrestling, music, dancing, hunting, riding and fencing, will prove to be a good part of our study."

"As to the rest this method of education ought to be carried on with a **severe sweetness**, quite contrary to the practice of our pedants, who instead of tempting and alluring children to letters by apt and gentle ways, do in truth present nothing before them but rods and ferrules, horror and cruelty. Away with this violence, away with this compulsion! than which, I certainly believe nothing more dulls and degenerates a noble nature."

"How much more decent would it be to see their classes strewn with green leaves and flowers than with the stumps of birch and willow? Were it left to my ordering, I should paint the school with pictures of joy and gladness."