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*Matthew Youngberg,*  
*Seton Hall University*  
ORCID ID 0000-0002-8205-5798

## **A Foundation for the Education of Males in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **An analysis of *John Locke: Some Thoughts Concerning Education***

*Abstract.* This article analyzes how ideas from the European Enlightenment affected formal education. John Locke was an English philosopher and political theorist. The author examines letters written by John Locke to a friend regarding the education of Locke's son. Locke was a proponent of using reason and a scientific approach in education. The author evaluated many points made by Locke in his letters, like the importance of sunlight and fresh air, to highlight how they differed from education at that time. Locke was known for laying the groundwork for Enlightenment. While discounted at the time, many of Locke's themes are still found in education today.

John Locke was born in England in 1632 to a noble family. Locke's father was a lawyer and served in the English Civil War, which gave Locke many important connections in his early life. Locke's connections allowed him to attend the prestigious Westminster School in London and later continue his studies at Oxford. At Oxford, Locke studied science, medicine, and philosophy which he translated into his works<sup>1</sup>. Locke's most famous works were regarding government, philosophy, and education. One of his most influential works was *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* which he published in 1693.

*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was a series of letters that Locke had written to Edward Clarke, the Lord of Chipley and a friend of Locke's who was seeking out advice regarding the education of his son. Locke did not intend for his writing to be a manual for education, instead it was a general foundation for what curriculum should include. On the same note, Locke did not write this for women or lower-class males. The ideas that he wrote about in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* were intended for elite males however, he would go on to write other works regarding education of the lower class and women. Over 9 years, Locke laid out a foundation for an education curriculum that would influence learning throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

One of John Locke's most famous enlightenment idea, the "tabula rasa" meaning "blank slate", was a major influence in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke believed that every person was born a blank slate that could be molded by their education, good or bad. He thought that with the right curriculum, society could form the archetype of a gentleman.

1. Patrick J. Connolly, "*John Locke 1632-1704*" (October 2021).

The reason why Locke was so intrigued by education is because he felt that a good curriculum would allow society to advance.

The two main facets of Locke's writing were health and morals. Being a trained physician, Locke believed that the foundation of any man's education was their health, most importantly their sleep. Lock wrote, "In this alone they are to be permitted to have their full satisfaction; nothing contributing more to the growth and health of children, than sleep"<sup>2</sup>. Locke understood the value of

sleep to a person's health, and he encouraged children to sleep as much as possible. However, he also wrote that once a child reached a certain age, they should not be able to sleep all day and it is up to their parents to determine when the change is appropriate. Going hand in hand with good sleep, Locke wrote about the importance of a good diet. He wrote extensively about when and what people should eat. Locke pushed for a simple, balanced diet that consisted of bread, milk, porridge, and meats. Locke also stressed the importance of mixing up mealtimes because he believed that too much consistency will cause students to develop an internal clock and they will be hungry at the same time every day; the human body will tell itself when it is hungry, it should not be conditioned to have set mealtimes.

Along the lines of health, Locke also wrote, "Another thing that is of great advantage to every one's health, but especially children's, is, to be much in the open air, and, very little, as may be, by the fire, even in winter"<sup>3</sup>. Being indoors too much is not healthy for the body. Fresh air refreshes the brain and makes learning more enjoyable. In Locke's opinion, learning to live a healthy lifestyle was only part of becoming a man, morals and manners were also a major part of

2. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Anodos Books, 2017), 14.

3. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Anodos Books, 2017), 9.

his curriculum. Locke felt that having good manners was the most important thing a boy could learn when becoming a gentleman. In his curriculum, Locke included everything from simple table manners to how to dress to when to use the bathroom. These ideas regarding health and manners were influential at the time but Locke's ideas regarding discipline had the longest lasting influence which is still seen in schools today.

Locke believed that students thrived when they are given freedom to explore their curiosity. To allow for this, Locke believed in as few rules as possible. Having too many rules can cause one of two problems. First, if all rules are enforced, the student will feel over punished and develop a resentment for the teacher. The second possible consequence of too many rules is that the teacher will not enforce every single rule, thus, the student will lose respect for the teacher's rules because only some rules will be enforced. As a solution, Locke recommended that teachers have as few rules as possible for their student and leave a lot of right and wrong decisions to be made by the students. Not only will this mean that students won't be disciplined as often, but they will also be able to learn good behavior and morals through experiences.

One of Locke's most influential ideas that came from *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was regarding the effectiveness of discipline. Locke wrote, "Such a sort of slavish discipline makes a slavish temper. The child submits, and dissembles obedience, whilst the fear of the rod hangs over him; but when that is removed, and, by being out of sight, he can promise himself impunity, he gives the greater scope to his natural inclination, which by this way is. not at all altered, but on the contrary heightened and increased in him; and after such restraint, breaks out usually with the more violence."<sup>4</sup>. Locke believed that students' behaviors were not shaped

4. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education 1693* (Anodos Books, 2017), 24.

through discipline, instead, good behavior is learned through experiences and role models. In fact, harsh discipline can in some cases cause children to develop resentment and lash out at their teachers and parents. The idea that good behavior cannot be forced upon students through discipline is an idea that still resonates through education to this day.

## References

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