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978-1-108-07536-7 - The Educator: Prize Essays on the Expediency and Means  
of Elevating the Profession of the Educator in Society

John Lalor

Excerpt

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## AN ESSAY, ETC.

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### PART I.

THE EXPEDIENCY OF ELEVATING THE PROFESSION OF  
THE EDUCATOR IN PUBLIC ESTIMATION.

#### CHAPTER I.

NATURE AND VALUE OF EDUCATION.

Experimental Education is yet in its infancy.—EDGEWORTH.

THE diffusion of just views of education, of the reforms which it needs, and of the manner in which they can be brought about, has long been a favourite object with those who believe that the condition of society, and particularly of its largest class, is susceptible of improvement. The progress of sound principles, however, has been extremely slow. Immense ignorance still prevails upon this subject, even among the classes called “educated.” Works have been published indeed, particularly of late years,\* abounding in true and enlarged views, which have given, and are giving, powerful impulses to thought;

\* Simpson’s “Necessity of Popular Education as a National Object.” — Wyse’s “Educational Reform.” — Mrs. Austen’s translation of Cousin’s Report on the state of Public Instruction in Prussia.

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## 2 IGNORANCE OF THE POWER OF EDUCATION.

but the task of public enlightenment is not to be accomplished by a few minds, however able and eloquent. It will require the efforts of innumerable labourers of various capacities. The most powerful can do but a small portion of the vast whole; the feeblest, whose arm is nerved by an earnest purpose, can do something. There is every reason, therefore, why any one who wishes well to the cause, should join in the struggle. If he can strike heartily but one blow, his attempt will not be in vain.

The present essay having for its purpose to show, 1st, The *expediency* of elevating, in the estimation of the public, the profession of the educator (or of those practically engaged in education); and 2nd, The *means* by which such an elevation can be brought about,—will be divided into two parts, corresponding to these two branches of the subject.

The chief difficulty with which a writer, who urges a reform in education, has to struggle, is the general ignorance of its *nature*,—of what it can do for mankind. If correct notions of its power were once impressed upon the public mind, so that men should feel the extent of their own educational want, improvements, which are now year after year vainly urged upon their attention, would at once be carried into effect. The utmost that is hoped, or dreamed by theorists, would be outstripped in action and practice by the energies of society, working out education, as they have worked out the arts dependent on the physical sciences. In attempting therefore to prove the advantage of giving increased social importance to the educational profession, it will be requisite, in the first place, to point out how much more than is usually supposed is properly included in education, and to show something of its power over human happiness. The explanations necessary for this purpose will occupy a considerable portion of the first part. They

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## COURSE OF THE ARGUMENT.

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are essential to an adequate understanding of what follows, — except for readers who have already bestowed considerable thought upon the subject,—and to such this essay is likely to present nothing new. The bearing of these explanations will be readily perceived, when it becomes necessary to show that the goodness or badness of education depends almost wholly on the intelligence and moral qualities of those by whom it is carried on; in other words, that the character of education must correspond with the character of its professors. It will appear that the inefficiency of existing instruction arises from the incompetency of those in whose hands it is placed; and that society can never feel the power of education until it calls into existence a class of effective educators. It will appear, further, that, if the profession is inferior to every other in appropriate skill and aptitude, this is only the natural consequence of the low place it holds in public estimation, which deters any from entering it who can engage in more respectable callings; thus turning off intellectual power into other paths of exertion, and attracting little but the ignorance, the imbecility, and the needy reluctant talent to which other professions are unattainable. It will hence appear that the interest of society in the growth of morals and intelligence,—in all the rich and abundant blessings that flow from good education,—indispensably requires an elevation in the social position of the educator.

Education, then, does not mean merely reading and writing, nor any degree, however considerable, of mere intellectual instruction. It is, in its largest sense, a process which extends from the commencement to the termination of existence. A child comes into the world, and at once his education begins. Often at his birth the seeds of disease or deformity are sown in his constitution—and while he hangs at his mother's breast, he is imbibing

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impressions which will remain with him through life. During the first period of infancy, the physical frame expands and strengthens; but its delicate structure is influenced for good or evil by all surrounding circumstances, — cleanliness, light, air, food, warmth. By and by, the young being within shows itself more. The senses become quicker. The desires and affections assume a more definite shape. Every object which gives a sensation; every desire gratified or denied; every act, word, or look of affection or of unkindness, has its effect, sometimes slight and imperceptible, sometimes obvious and permanent, in building up the human being; or, rather, in determining the direction in which it will shoot up and unfold itself. Through the different states of the infant, the child, the boy, the youth, the man, the development of his physical, intellectual, and moral nature goes on, the various circumstances of his condition incessantly acting upon him — the healthfulness or unhealthfulness of the air he breathes; the kind, and the sufficiency of his food and clothing; the degree in which his physical powers are exerted; the freedom with which his senses are allowed or encouraged to exercise themselves upon external objects; the extent to which his faculties of remembering, comparing, reasoning, are tasked; the sounds and sights of home; the moral example of parents; the discipline of school; the nature and degree of his studies, rewards, and punishments; the personal qualities of his companions; the opinions and practices of the society, juvenile and advanced, in which he moves; and the character of the public institutions under which he lives. The successive operation of all these circumstances upon a human being from earliest childhood, constitutes his education; — an education which does not terminate with the arrival of manhood, but continues through life, — which is itself, upon the concurrent testimony of revela-

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## NATURE OF EDUCATION.—LAWS OF MIND. 5

tion and reason, a state of probation or education for a subsequent and more glorious existence.

The first inquiries then which present themselves are, whether circumstances act upon the mind at random, or according to any fixed and discoverable laws? — and how far is it in our power to control their operation? To these it can be answered, that the growth of the human being, from infancy up, in mind as well as in body, takes place, at all events to a *great extent*, according to fixed laws. The assertion is qualified simply to avoid certain controversies which have no practical relation to the subject. No one can observe the movements of his own mind, or the mental operations of another, particularly a child, without discovering the frequent recurrence of the same combinations of thoughts, or of thoughts and acts. When two sensations, or a sensation and an idea, or two ideas, have been frequently experienced together, the occurrence of one calls up the other. The name “table” suggests the idea. The first word of a familiar poem brings the others after it. A sudden blow excites anger. Frequent pain makes fretfulness habitual. Here we see the operation of *laws*,—laws of mind discoverable by observation of nature, like the laws of mechanics or astronomy. These must form the basis of practical education, — the science on which the art is founded. The practical art of education has regard to a small part only of the long train of circumstances which operate upon a human being; — namely, that portion which belongs to his early life, and which is within the control of others. In this sense education means the body of practical rules, for the regulation of the circumstances about children, by which they may be trained up to the greatest perfection of their nature.

The nature of the laws of the human constitution, and of the power which a knowledge of them can give us,

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will appear more distinctly from a consideration of each of the three branches into which education is now, by common consent, divided—physical, intellectual, and moral. It is convenient to consider them separately, but each is intimately connected with the others. It will not be necessary to attempt, even in the most abridged form, a complete view of any one of these branches. A reference to a few principles in each, will be sufficient to show that by the general application of a system of education, adapted to the wants and capacities of human nature, the condition of society, and particularly of its poorer classes, could be greatly elevated, and a host of evils which afflict mankind avoided.

## PHYSICAL EDUCATION.

The influence of the physical frame upon the intellect, morals, and happiness of a human being, is now universally admitted. Perhaps, the extent of this influence will be thought greater in proportion to the accuracy with which the subject is examined. The train of thought and feeling is perpetually affected by the occurrence of sensations arising from the state of our internal organs. The connexion of high mental excitement with the physical system is obvious enough, when the latter is under the influence of stimulants, as wine or opium : but other mental states,—depression of spirits—irritability of temper—indolence, and the craving for sensual gratification, are, it is probable, no less intimately connected with the condition of the body. The selfish, exacting habits which so often attend ill health, and the mean artifices to which feebleness of body leads, are not, indeed, necessary results ; but the physical weakness so often produces the moral evil, that no moral treatment can be successful which overlooks physical causes. Without reference to its moral effects, bodily pain forms a

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## FOOD.

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large proportion of the amount of human misery. It is, therefore, of the highest importance, that a child should grow up sound and healthful in body, and with the utmost degree of muscular strength that education can communicate.

There are a few common truths with respect to *food, air, cleanliness, and exercise*, which, if acted upon, would go far to accomplish as much for all children.

A regular and sufficient supply of nutritious food is essential to the healthful support of the body, and the proper developement of its organs. If the food is insufficient, the whole system suffers,—the blood is impoverished, and produces general debility of the organs and bodily exhaustion. The moral effect is equally injurious. The almost perpetual craving caused by insufficiency of food absorbs the attention, and while such a state of mind continues, it is next to impossible that any strong moral feeling or regard for others can grow up. In most cases, where the natural appetites of children are unsatisfied, it unfortunately arises from the narrow circumstances of their parents; but there are multitudes of instances in which abundant means for the performance of this first duty of a father are squandered in ruinous excitement. It is to be feared, too, that the cheapness, with which some schools recommend themselves to the public, is accomplished at the expense of the children, by curtailing the quantity, or lowering the quality, of their food. An excessive quantity of food is equally fatal to the bodily and mental health. Children eat to excess when their food is of various kinds or of a highly stimulating nature. The digestive organs become oppressed, and a train of disorders follow. Tyrannical ill temper is the mental result, and parents and friends reap the natural harvest of pampering and sensual indulgence.

Pure air is as essential as food to the support of hu-

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man existence. When the lungs are forced to breathe an impure atmosphere, the blood, deprived of its needful supply of oxygen, imperfectly depurated, and corrupted still further by contact with unwholesome gases, spreads weakness and disease through the system. The difference between city and country children, which strikes every eye, arises mainly from this cause. Amongst the wealthier class there is, generally, a strong sense of the importance of pure air, and a corresponding anxiety to obtain it for their children. Even among these classes, however, there is much neglect, as in the ventilation of bed-rooms; and often an injurious excess of caution, which dreads the least exposure to a breeze, and by confining children to the house, not only prevents sufficient muscular exercise, but deprives the expanding frame of the delightful and invigorating stimulus of fresh air. But the children of the poorer classes in large towns are the great sufferers from impurity of atmosphere. Living in narrow lanes and courts, in which accumulated filth is perpetually loading the air with noxious ingredients, they are crowded in small rooms, which seldom receive even the wretched ventilation that such places admit of. The inmates of such habitations sleep together in a space the enclosed atmosphere of which, even with the best ventilation in the day-time, would supply but a small proportion of the requisite quantity of vital air. With its absolute impurities it is nothing less than slow poison to the sleepers. In these rooms it frequently happens that the children, particularly the younger ones, who need air most, are shut up for safety in the day-time, during the absence of working parents. And when they are let loose their sports take place in these same narrow lanes and alleys, where physical contaminations are the least evils that can befall them.



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## AIR.—PLAY-GROUNDS.

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It is not easy to remedy these evils, but much may be done to diminish them. A good large play-ground should be considered an indispensable part of every school. Here, at least, the children might breathe as pure an atmosphere as large towns could supply, and, what is of not less consequence, feel practically its importance. Play-grounds would, indeed, frequently be expensive; but on what public object is expenditure justifiable if not on this, which so intimately concerns the health,—and through the health, as well as in a more direct manner, the morals of the people? It is not a good, but a mischief, to crowd children into rooms for the purpose of schooling, where there is no play-ground, and a supply of pure air is impossible. Yet, in all great towns, numbers of such schools may be found, in which on entrance the atmosphere is felt perfectly oppressive, and the children appear languid and restless, enlivened only by the casual opening of the door, to admit at the same moment a visitor and a stream of fresh air. The most open, airy, and healthful localities should invariably be selected for schools. School business should be frequently interrupted by a short run into the play-ground. A few minutes so used would infuse vigour into all proceedings. When the business of a class admitted of its being taken into the open air in fine weather, a master would often find the change sufficient to convert languor into alertness and attention.

Habits of cleanliness are both healthful and moralizing. The skin is an organ through which, by means of a constant but insensible perspiration, a great part of the waste matter of the human body is carried off. When it remains without washing for any length of time, the matter collected on its surface obstructs the minute vessels or apertures, of which it contains a greater number than an equal surface of the finest cambric, and pre-

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vents the waste matter from passing out. The consequence is, that some of the other excretory organs are stimulated to an unhealthy action,— and this gradually produces weakness and ill-health, or some specific form of disease, as of the bowels or lungs. When we know that numbers pass through life, having scarcely ever given their entire persons a thorough ablution ; that multitudes never dream of touching with water any part of their bodies but the face, the hands, and sometimes the feet, except during the extreme heat of summer, we can readily find in such habits the cause of a considerable portion of the disease which exists. The healthful action of the skin requires that its impurities should be removed by regular ablutions of the entire person. The delicious excitement of the first bath in summer, to those who discontinue bathing in winter, is chiefly caused by the stimulus given to the cutaneous vessels, and through them to the whole system, by the removal of the collected impurities of many months. Many, to whom entire ablution by bathing or sponging is a daily practice, can speak of its admirable efficacy in bracing and harmonising the system, and guarding it against the varieties of colds, coughs, &c. Such habits appear extremely troublesome and difficult of acquirement to those who grow up to mature life with opposite ones ; but it is in our power, by education, to make them an essential part of the *nature* of the young. Children might be trained to habits of strict and entire cleanliness, which would never leave them, because they would make it far more painful to omit regular ablution than it now is to the most reluctant to practise it. If popular education did nothing more than create such habits in the children of the poor in towns, it would prevent a fearful amount of physical and moral disorder. Children habituated to cleanliness would make a change in the poorest abodes.