

Returning to nature: letting children be children--exploring the value of natural education in Rousseau's *Emile*

Hanyi LUO

Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, China

Abstract: When his contemporaries in the Enlightenment cheered and called for reason, Rousseau was well aware of the problems that reason would bring to human society. Honoring nature is Rousseau's solution. He advocated "natural education" in the natural process of development, allowing the free development of the human body and mind. It can be said that Rousseau was almost a century ahead of the world in recognizing the importance of nature to human beings. This article is a reading note after reading Rousseau's educational work *Emile*.

Key words: natural education; Rousseau; *Emile*; take your time

1 Introduction

As a pioneer of Romanticism, Rousseau believed that reason was the most difficult and last talent to develop. He portrays himself as the ideal teacher in *Émile*, and the character of Émile carries the image of the ideal student in Rousseau's mind. Rousseau states the significance of education shortly after the opening chapter: "This education we receive either from nature, or from men, or from things. The inner development of our talents and organs is the education of nature; others teach us how to make use of this development, the education of men; we gain a good experience of the things that affect us, the education of things." The education of men and the education of things achieve the coherence between the three in following the education of nature, and the three do not exist in isolation from each other. This paper discusses Rousseau's idea of natural education as explained in the book from the perspective of a freshman teacher trainee, taps into its value which still glitters today, and puts forward its own humble opinion.

2 The principle of education should be in accordance with man's natural instincts

In contrast to Locke's main criterion for educating children - reasoning, Rousseau advocated the use of natural law to educate children, that is to follow the characteristics of the child's physical and mental development, and respect the child's individual characteristics. He suggested that a truly free man wants to do only what he can do and what he likes to do. It is natural for people to love cute, delicate children and to be bored with children who are difficult to discipline, bossy and arrogant, while nature arranges parental love to cope with the situation of the child's tender state. There is a reason why everything in the world is arranged by nature, and Rousseau was convinced that nature arranges everything for the best.

According to educator Herr Spencer, "The purpose of education is to develop the human personality." Just as there are no two leaves exactly the same, each person is unique and has his or her own uniqueness; it's not about strengths and

weaknesses, it's just that each person has his or her own characteristics. Every child is a natural wonder, and it is important to accept the child's true individuality without having to forcefully correct the child's personality traits to conform to traditional values or parental expectations. If we can appreciate the child's natural growth and help the child to discover and perfect himself, to find his true self, and to respect and love himself, in Rousseau's eyes, this is a successful education.

The aim of natural education advocated by Rousseau is to cultivate the natural man. According to Rousseau, natural man is a person who develops according to his own nature, and is physically and mentally healthy, physically and mentally developed, grows freely in the process of growth, and is not constrained, as well as able to be self-supporting, socially adaptive, and able to bear social responsibilities [1]. It can be said that the natural man advocated by Rousseau is not the isolated island like "Walden Lake" type of natural man, nor is it the savage in the uncivilized state, but it is the natural man with social nature, who is living in the society, able to assume social responsibility and a natural person in society

Guided by the laws of nature, Rousseau demanded that learning should be consistent with the child's degree of mental development and based on the laws of nature. He believed that children have their own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling, and that it would be foolish to try to replace children's methods with those of adults. Children have a strong sense of absorption, curiosity and self-learning, which is a necessary prerequisite for nature education. He emphasized that different approaches should be taken according to the age of the child. Why do we crouch down to dialogue with children? We crouch down not only in terms of our body, but in terms of distance. When we crouch down, we can see the world in children's eyes, we can lower our posture and get along with children on an equal footing, we can better discover their facial expressions, give them a gentle gaze, and a greater sense of security. Putting children at the same level as adults is a form of respect and attention [2].

3 The greatest law of education: don't fight for time, take your time

The education of man is an eternal topic. For education, the best way is to take your time. As the old saying goes: "If you want to go fast, you can't go fast enough." The growth of a child is a gradual process, and it is never possible to pull up seedlings to grow, nor can it be achieved overnight. In contrast, in the current wave of involution, parents and teachers take the "win at the starting line" as a guideline. In their attitude towards their children, there is too much hate, too much haste, too much over-expectation not knowing and ignoring the natural growth of children's laws. "Chicken child" is forced by parents to enroll in a variety of interest classes. When they cannot follow their own heart preferences and be forced to make choices, how can there be any "interest" in interest classes? In the fast-moving contemporary society, "take your time" seems to be the ideal law of education.

Education is a slow art. Slow, needs to be calm and peaceful; slow, needs to be careful and delicate; slow, requires patience and endurance education, as a slow art, especially need to reasonably treat students' deficiencies, defects and even mistakes education, as a slow art, needs to leave enough space and time for waiting. Zhang Wenzheng puts forward the concept of "vitalized education" in *Education is a Slow Art*. The implementation of "life-oriented education" involves both subjective and objective aspects. Teachers are subjective and need to not only respect and treat students well, but also understand the characteristics of students. While focusing on the acquisition of knowledge by all students, they need to pay attention to the developmental differences of each student and provide teaching methods that are appropriate to students' learning pace and level of mastery [3]. They should be aware of unusual emotional changes in students and respond in a timely manner; they should provide teaching methods that match the speed at which students acquire and assimilate knowledge; and they should focus on emotional and reciprocal interactions between teachers and students Objective conditions refer to the classroom environment and learning space. Teachers can create a good learning

atmosphere through seating arrangement, green plant placement, board drawing, reading corner settings, etc., to achieve the maximization of the value of limited space.

There is no such thing as a "quick fix" in education, especially in the arts, which is the result of time and effort. Primary school is the stage for laying the foundation for future learning, so the leading role of teachers is particularly important. Language teachers also generally serve as class teachers. For mischievous and hyperactive children, teachers should adhere to the principle of taking their time, encouraging the children, discovering the children's bright spots, and giving the children care and patience.

4 The use and development of Rousseau's natural education principle in primary education

Although Rousseau's theory of natural education has such radical views as "the supremacy of nature" and "treating education as natural growth", as future primary school language teachers, we should take the essence of the principles and remove the dregs on the basis of internalizing the principles, and draw the operable part of the principles to apply them in teaching.

Childhood is an important stage of psychological development, laying the foundation of knowledge and learning abilities for lifelong learning activities. Rousseau suggested that the most important thing for children at this stage (2-12 years) is to educate the senses. As Dr Montessori said, I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand. Rousseau placed great importance on sensory education, believing that the senses are the gateway to knowledge and the tools for the development of reason. To learn to think, one must first train the senses and bodily organs in order to lay a good foundation for rational activities. Based on the above views, Rousseau emphasized the accumulation of sensory experience of things around us through activities. In our future primary school teaching, we can intersperse rich practical programmes, such as "learning about agriculture", "learning about the army" and "sending warmth with love" voluntary service activities. Instead of exposing children to electronic devices, we should lead them to embrace nature, observe bees collecting honey, learn to weed and plough, enjoy an art exhibition, learn to recite a poem and run under the blue sky.

Rousseau suggested that teaching must inspire students to think and lead them to acquire knowledge consciously. Teachers should guide students to observe, analyse, compare and generalize, giving children more opportunities to ask questions. In the design of the course plan, teachers should focus on setting questions and inspiring words from the shallow to deep, guiding children to read the text over and over again, understand the text step by step and gain knowledge, rather than "filling in the blanks" to instill knowledge into students.

Education requires a long-lasting attention, patience and waiting. The need is to grow and submerge. Education can be like a snail's walk. As long as the mood is relaxed, footsteps are slowed down, and vision is long, we can take a poetic stance, find the beauty of life in education, enjoy the happiness of the profession. "See the child as a child", take child-oriented, and do follow nature, so that child can learn happily and grow healthily!

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] [French] Rousseau. 1978. *Emile*. Li Ping'ou, translation. Beijing: Commercial Press.
- [2] Pigeon. 2021. Returning nature to children: Rousseau's educational thought revisited from *Emile*. *Fujian Education*: 62-63.
- [3] Zhang WQ. 2008. *Education is the Art of Slowness*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.