

Positions Concerning the Training up of Children:

Richard Mulcaster's Pedagogic Reform

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Historically, shifts in ideology, along with political, social and religious turmoil, are characteristics of the English Renaissance. Revolution in all areas abounded, and writers attempted to understand such drastic changes through writing. With treatises, pamphlets, and books, they sought answers and provided solutions to the abundant confusion in their everyday lives. Every issue was susceptible to the chopping block and up for rigorous debate, including classroom instruction. Through his work Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children, Richard Mulcaster reformed Renaissance education by effectively using modern yet conservative ideas on the following topics: incorporating physical activity into the core curriculum, promoting uniformity in teaching, and encouraging the formal education of women.

At the time of publication (1581), Mulcaster occupied the position of headmaster at the Merchant Taylors' School, the largest school in London (Barker 1 and Oliphant 18). According to the editor William Baker, "Positions expresses some of the frustration he felt with the condition of schools and schooling at the time" (Barker 1). Overall, the book contained a largely political tone and served as an introduction to the debates over pedagogy in the English Renaissance (1).

During the Tudor reign, schools like the Merchant Taylors' School were often founded or reorganized under secular patronage, instead of the old standard, religious sponsorship (1). Humanist reformers brought to England a new, stricter, classical curriculum available to a wide variety of people, including the growing middle class and those of poorer origins. At this time, England did not have any regulations regarding education; therefore, it was largely a community responsibility, with informal instruction provided by clerics, educated relatives, and women of the area (1). Teaching had yet to

become a standardized profession. In the 1580's, a network of grammar schools expanded and stabilized, but not enough growth occurred to classify them, collectively, as a modern-day system (1).

Prior to Mulcaster's text, many Renaissance writers advocated physical education, including Sir Thomas Elyot and Roger Ascham. Standard schoolbooks contained information regarding sports for children, as well as the works of Erasmus, Cordier, and Vives (2). However, these writers considered athletics to be extra-curricular and unattached to academia, while Mulcaster sought to integrate exercise into a regular school program under the supervision of a training master.

During the Renaissance, physical health had yet to be explored as a science and limited medical knowledge and technology kept the human body a mystery. Therefore, the definition of exercise varied. Mulcaster defined exercise as "a vehement, and a voluntarie stirring of ones body, which altereth the breathing, whose end is to maintaine health, and to bring the bodie to a verie good habit"(Mulcaster 53). In other words, if the activity changed the state, force, or pace of natural breath, it qualified as exercise. Because Mulcaster provided a broad definition, exercise ranged anywhere from laughing to hunting.

In the beginning of chapter six of Positions, Mulcaster presented his main argument for the importance of physical fitness. His claim in defense of sports was that:

The soule and bodie being copartners in good and ill, in sweete and sowre, in mirth and mourning, and having generally a common sympathie, and a mutuall feeling in all passions: how can they be, or rather why

should they be severed in traine? the one made stronge, and well qualified,  
the other left feeble, and a praye to infirmitie? (Mulcaster 51)

Mulcaster viewed the body and soul as equal partners that worked together for the well being of the human body. Because of this relationship, the physical body needed training in the form of exercise just like the mind received instruction in a formal school setting. From this general argument, Mulcaster then solidified his reasoning by relating this concept to students in the classroom:

Bycause all men neede helpe, for necessarie health, and ready execution of their naturall actions: but particularly for those men, whose life is in leasure, whose braynes be most busied, and their wittes most wearied, in which kinde studentes be no small part, but the greatest of all, which so use their mindes as if they cared not for their bodies, and yet so neede their bodies, as without the strength and soundnesse whereof, they be good for nothing. (52)

To Mulcaster, the body became the source of all action and chief assistant to the mind. Most men exercised the body in everyday labor; however, students remained indoors in the classroom and employed their brains instead of their bodies. Without a healthy physical form, the body became vulnerable to illnesses, leaving a well-trained mind trapped in a diseased cage that prevented man from putting his wit to use for the greater, common good.

Following his defense, Mulcaster outlined three different types of exercise and selected specific activities in order to discuss in detail their function and proper technique. He spent thirty chapters alone discussing exercise, eighteen of those

highlighting specific exercises' benefits and drawbacks. He included chapters on swimming, hunting, leaping, walking, running, laughing, riding, wrestling, loud reading and singing, as well as dancing.

Even though Mulcaster presented valid reasons for athletics, unfortunately, he possessed limited information on the sports he illustrates. His arguments remained largely theoretical, and Mulcaster readily admitted that he was exploring a hypothetical concept and not a daily standard. The explanation for the lack of substance in his reasoning occurred in chapter thirty-five with the statement:

For the professed argument of the whole booke, I know not any comparable to *Hieronimus Mercurialis*, a verie learned *Italian Physician* now in our time, which hath taken great paines to sift out all writers, what so ever concerneth the whole *Gymnasticall* and exercising argument, whose advice in this question I have my selfe much used, where he did fit my purpose. (134)

For most of his descriptions, Mulcaster relied heavily on a translated edition of Girolamo Mercuriale's *De arte gymnastica libri sex*. How Mulcaster encountered Mercuriale's text, or what edition he used is unknown (Barker 25). Mulcaster practiced a constant routine of reading and borrowing sections from the treatise; he then edited the information by omitting debate and authorities (26). By modifying Mercuriale's treatise, Mulcaster gave his own arguments a more ideological direction. Mulcaster differed from his predecessors, Elyot and Ascham, by discussing his program in relation to all groups and social classes, instead of focusing on the education of the nobility and the wealthy. Mulcaster did not imply that certain sports, such as fencing and riding, should be

instructed because they were socially correct that only weakens his argument. Instead, he contended that physical activities should be taught because they have scientific and medical foundation (27).

Mulcaster continued to introduce modern yet conservative ideas in his next section on the education of women. During the Renaissance, women often tolerated the gender roles dictated by society and remained largely in the private sphere and left the public life to their male spouses or relatives. They were expected to be wives and mothers who depended on class advancement or regression through marriage and the status of the husband. Women were frequently viewed as objects and legal extensions of their male partners, therefore making women inferior to men, regardless of the station in life. Educational opportunities for women were largely limited to the household, even females of royal blood or those belonging to a higher social class. Any formal instruction was considered mostly for the training of a prospective gentleman or member of the nobility. Unfortunately, most Renaissance writers reflected this attitude of male superiority in their publications, as did Mulcaster. However, Mulcaster shared the prevailing perspective of his time; he still defended a woman's right to an education with fervor and dedicated a chapter of Positions to the subject.

Mulcaster began chapter thirty-eight by providing four arguments in support of female education. His opening defense was written as follows: "The first is the manner and custome of my cuntry, which allowing them to learne, will be lothe to be contraried by any of her countrey men" (169). According to tradition, reading, writing, and fine singing and playing were the subjects that dominated an informal female education. These disciplines should be taught to women to increase their desirability at

court and as a result, in marriage. Most men would have agreed that a woman educated in those arts adds to her charm and allure, not subtracts from it. Mulcaster used a simple yet effective argument that could be easily supported just by an individual's observations from being in high society.

Then, more support followed when Mulcaster asserted that, "The second is the duetie, which we owe unto them, whereby we are charged in conscience, not to leave them lame, in that which is for them" (169). Using emotional appeal, Mulcaster believed that the conscience would not allow men to leave women uneducated in their station in life. He felt a sense of obligation to instruct women and attempted to instill that idea in the minds of his readers. Even though Mulcaster advocated female learning, he limited the concept with the last part of his statement, "in that which is for them." By advocating the education of women in what is "for them," Mulcaster left women in the private sphere, and the statement implied that ladies should remain in their current gender roles. He never suggested that women culturally advance and still left them to conform to the guidelines put in place by society.

Furthermore, another argument stated, "The third is their owne towardnesse, which God by nature would never have given them, to remain idle, or to small purpose" (170). Mulcaster cited that the female sex possesses many talents and that by training and refining them, they can be better used for the purposes of men and the achievement of their goals. Otherwise, God would have not given women that quality. Mulcaster used a straightforward religious argument that effectively serves his purpose. Most writers incorporated religion into their arguments because most Renaissance citizens would not fight against the will of God. Mulcaster followed that same line of logic. Notice that

Mulcaster emphasized women as instruments to men and did not give them their own desires. The dominant attitude of the time still remains present in his writing.

All of the previous reasons relied on primarily either appeals to emotion or male egotism. His final and fourth reason was based more upon actual results and past achievement than upon rhetorical technique. Mulcaster said, “The fourth is the excellent effectes in that sex, when they have had helpe of good bringing up” (170). Using the example of women past educated, women who received good instruction benefited from it; therefore, all women deserved the opportunity. Later in the chapter, Mulcaster looked to the works of Aristotle, Boccaccio, and other histories for sources of well-trained women who had performed great acts of valor and virtue as a result of such learning.

To make his concept more of a reality, Mulcaster then explained when a woman should be taught, as well as what subject areas, and how much instruction should be received. Mulcaster’s recommended program matches most curricula then found in the current education provided to women of a higher status. Mulcaster took a privatized ideal and turned it into a public concept.

Even though Mulcaster supported female education, he never allowed women to have separate desires and goals from men. His intended audience would not object to such statements. In chapter thirty-eight, he says, “The bringing up of young maidens in any kynd of learning, is but an accessory by the waye’ to the education of young men”(176). Mulcaster supplied women with tools, but did not permit them to be used. For example, divinity may be taught, but women were not allowed “pulpittes to preach in” (182). Even though Mulcaster believed that education served political purposes, women could not publicly benefit England; they remained secret servants to the country.

Mulcaster chiefly mentioned one way in which women could use their education: to better raise her children. Again, Mulcaster was in conflict with his own reasoning. A woman teaching her children in the home was a form of private instruction, while Mulcaster advocated public education for everyone. Surprisingly, this contradiction appeared in other texts of the time period. “For writers, resolving the issue meant redefining education or the nature of woman, or both,” William Baker said, which probably proved to be too great a task.

Mulcaster deserved credit for speaking highly in favor of female instruction, even though speculation regarding his motivation existed. Throughout the chapter, Mulcaster referenced Queen Elizabeth as the perfect example of an educated lady and called her a “tenth muse” (Barker 33). His excessive compliments of her in this chapter and in other places throughout the book signified a pleasing attitude that may have been used to seek her patronage and favor.

Mulcaster remained largely conservative in his presentation of modern education reform so that he would not offend his intended audience. He, along with other humanists, stayed within the boundaries of a traditional framework (O’Neill 246). Even though England’s local and national governing bodies endured multiple attempts to legislate education during the sixteenth century, uniformity presented itself only in the form of government-approved textbooks such as Lily’s *Grammar*, Nowell’s *Catechism*, and Ocland’s *Anglorum praeli* (Barker 33 and Orme 253). Even then, a lot of variety existed in English Renaissance education. Individual teachers established their own curriculum, which changed frequently because of the surplus or shortage of required texts. In addition to textbook shortages, the qualifications of the teacher ranged from the

local village woman to a man with a Master of Arts degree. In addition to an array of qualifications, a high turnover rate limited the potential of a growing education system. Recent graduates often taught for only a few years before moving into an easier life as a clergyman. Furthermore, because of poor pay, educators frequently supported themselves with other work, such as preaching or farming. As a result, the educational duties of the teacher were often neglected (Barker 33). In chapter forty-one of Positions, Mulcaster outlined several reforms to improve Elizabethan education, including offering higher pay and replacing the old system of colleges. Overall, Mulcaster sought to establish teaching as a profession. In his view, a schoolmaster had an important political function that started in the classroom and ended at the general well-being of the public (33).

First, Mulcaster advocated revising the old college system by reorganizing the facilities into divisions of seven colleges based on profession or a specific area of study. Because Mulcaster viewed education for political purposes, most of the colleges were to have political connections. The colleges included a place for language (tongues), mathematics, philosophy, law, physics, and divinity. In the next section of the chapter, Mulcaster defended his logic. For example, in the defense for a college of tongues, Mulcaster wrote,

that which is for tounge is so necessary as scant anything more.

For the tounge being receites for matter, without perfect understanding of them, what hope is there to understand matter...how can things be properly understood by us, which use of the ministrie and service of wordes to know them by, onelesse the force of speech be thoroughly knowen? (Mulcaster 242)

Mulcaster then stated that he heard deficiencies in the addresses of great speakers, so a language school would eliminate such faults. While that was true, a uniform English language had yet to be established, creating many difficulties within the general public and the education system.

Mulcaster presented a final, seventh college devoted to the training of educators. Although the idea appeared modern, Mulcaster was actually calling for the reinstatement of the medieval grammar system for the training of teachers that had collapsed during Mulcaster's own lifetime. He sought to revitalize the school, but also to place it on the same level of importance as the other colleges. Mulcaster believed that if grammar had its own school, it would gain dignity. He sought respect for the teacher by having conferences between the parents and teachers. Mulcaster claimed that the child "by shed of teares, and some childish passion" worked the parents against the teacher (243). Such meetings eliminated any misunderstanding. This concept placed the teacher in more of an advisor type of role where the teachers and parents worked with each other equally to the benefit of the child, instead of the teacher acting as a servant to the public. Mulcaster wanted to bring respect and dignity to the profession and placed teachers on the same level as other professionals, and, of course, he advocated higher pay.

Richard Mulcaster made a profound impact on English Renaissance education. He skillfully presented modern ideas in a conservative way. His arguments contained in Positions Concerning The Training Up of Children outlined several reforms that were different from the reasoning of his colleagues and contemporaries. His thoughts anticipate the modern education of today. Such concepts continue in his later work, The Elementarie. Mulcaster paved the way for modern education by encouraging physical

education, advocating the education of women, and promoting uniformity. He answered Renaissance questions about education and reform and helped England find a new pedagogic direction.