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Introduction

Education and nature

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Although in antiquity considerations about nature and education were common¹ and the very question of the “nature” of Man was a central tenet in the emergence of a distinctive Christian concept of education,² changes in the very concept of nature in the West, and the new trust in the power of education in modern times, posed the question of the entanglements of concepts of education and of nature, especially human nature, in a new way. And while in the Western Enlightenment human nature was defined on the one hand precisely as its freedom and ability to perfect, thus providing the idea for a great educational programme, on the other hand, as biological nature (whether understood as a plant, as intelligence, or a genetic programme), it was always its limit, its fetters. Their relationship was disputed early on and repeatedly renegotiated. An anonymous English author in the nineteenth century systematically inquired into this specific but by no means completely new problem and lastly gave nature precedence over education:

Man cannot long be truly virtuous, wise, healthy, and happy, but by conforming himself to the laws of nature, since nature it is, and not education, that has given him those faculties and feelings he has, to act and to enjoy life . . . But to conclude, the peculiar constitution of each individual, may be more or less perfected by education, but cannot be *essentially* changed by it, indeed, so far from being essentially changed by it, the constitution of his body, as well as of his mind continually, we believe, determines the general effects direct management, and likewise casual circumstances, produce upon both his Moral and Intellectual Character.³

¹ We take here only Quintilian as a case in point: Elaine Fantham, “The Concept of Nature and Human Nature in Quintilian’s Psychology and Theory of Instruction,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13, no. 2 (1995): 125–36; W. Martin Bloomer, “Quintilian on the Child as a Learning Subject,” *The Classical World* 105, no. 1 (2011): 109–37.

² Again, as a case in point, on Augustine: Jürgen Oelkers, “Das heilige Kind: ein kleiner Nachtrag,” in *Kontextualisierungen. Festschrift für Alfred Langewand zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Florian Bernstoff, Andreas Ledl, and Steffen Schlüter (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010), 43–71; Gareth B. Matthews, “The Educational Thought of Augustine,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 50–61.

³ *Inquiry, with a view to ascertain how far nature and education respectively determine the moral and intellectual character of Man* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, in the Strand and J. and A. Arch, 1823), 355. Italics in the original.

Even in a time marked by an enthusiastic trust in the power of education, supported by sensualist conceptions of learning and experience, “nature” in the sense of “the given” still played a major role in educational concepts and discussions.

Yet which effects facilitated this prevalence of nature over education in the time when basic concepts of modern political and social life were in the making? Did “nature” justify purportedly inherent inequalities, or did it promote egalitarian views of learning and education? For some, like an English anonymous author commenting on the French Revolution, it went without saying that inequality and nature were twins:

The inequalities, amongst men, with respect to wealth, power, estimation, and rank, are the necessary result of unequal talents and dispositions, of unequal opportunities of displaying those talents and disposition, and of a variety of circumstances, determined indeed by God, but with regard to us, entirely fortuitous. If it be natural for the sea to ebb and flow; if it be natural for the moon to assume various phases; if it be natural for the sun to rise and set; if it be natural for all vegetables to spring and wither; it is natural for men to be unequal.⁴

For others, following the arguments advanced by Helvetius in the eighteenth century,⁵ the Spanish economist Valentín de Foronda (1751–1821) sustained that all “natural minds are equal”.⁶ He was so adamant in his defence of a natural equality that he not even admitted the difference of climates – at that time an accepted cause for differences among Men⁷ – as forming unequal minds (*entendimientos*).⁸ The struggle between these two views was (and still is) harsh: the American author and ardent Republican Robert Coram (1761–1796) saw in the proponents of natural inequality a group of swindlers. These men “create an artificial inequality among themselves, and then cry out it is all natural”.⁹ Not only in the time after the unsettling effects of the French Revolution “nature” was a plastic and authoritative argument when dealing with the uncertainty of modern times and modern education.

The time during which modern education in general and modern schooling in particular emerged and spread across the globe was, in addition, marked by the ambitious progress of separating and dominating those

⁴ Philodiceus, *A Letter on Equality, addressed to the Public* (London?: n.d., c.1794), 16.

⁵ Claude Adrien Helvétius, *A Treatise on Man, His Intellectual Faculties and His Education* (London: Printed for B. Law, 1777).

⁶ Valentín de Foronda, *Carta en que se prueba que todos los entendimientos son iguales* (Madrid: En la Imprenta de Cano, 1801), 5.

⁷ Mike Hulme, “Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism,” *Osiris* 26, no. 1 (2011): 245–66. For the popularity of this idea in a specific educational context see Joanna Orzel, “The South versus the North, the Piarists versus the Jesuits: The Educational Dispute Based On Nature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth,” *Paedagogica Historica* 55, no. 5 (2019): 694–702.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ Robert Coram, *Political Inquiries: to which is added, a plan for the general establishment of schools throughout the United States* (Wilmington: Printed by Andrews and Brynberg, 1791), 85.

phenomena labelled as “nature”. As in the discussions about equality and inequality, “nature” increasingly became an “Other”, albeit a significant one. The very question of nature versus education shows a consequential disentanglement of hitherto rather connected phenomena. Since the early modern era, the modern project of education has been closely associated with this modernist project, where the clear distinction between a rather unchangeable “nature”, on the one hand, and a historically conceived, changing society, on the other, defined a constitutive element in the understanding of reality.¹⁰ An exploration of the history of education may reveal that this clear-cut separation has been constantly challenged and undermined by hybrid phenomena and networks between these two realms.¹¹

Nature has classically been a contentious subject within educational thinking, yet nature has not only been a point of reference for ideas and theories, but for educational practices as well. The European Enlightenment repositioned nature as a determining arena and the backdrop for educational practices. Since then, nature has become a central reference point for educational thinking and practices in a variety of forms and dimensions but it has always remained contested. For example, in Germany in the early nineteenth century the concept of “nature” was constituted as a subversive discourse against the discursive and institutional hegemony of neo-humanistic educationalists and school officials. Its goal was to incorporate the “natural” and the sciences into educational theory and practice. This “pedagogical naturalism” with its different and often contradictory connotations found its expression in numerous entries in pedagogical encyclopaedias, educational articles, and pedagogical books.¹²

This special issue reunites contributions presented and discussed at the fortieth meeting of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education held at Berlin in August–September 2018. It shows both the advances and differentiation of the historiography of education in questions related to nature and natural phenomena and also a series of problems to be faced. Even though this introduction does not aim to frame a new research field, it nevertheless tries to systematically link the contributions of this special issue.¹³ In doing so, we see the differentiation of historiography related to four main ideas.

First, nature has proved a somewhat contradictory *argument* in educational

¹⁰ This idea was most famously advanced in Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Original from 1991.

¹¹ Beyond the central idea advanced by Latour about the futile attempts to clearly separate both fields, see the pioneering work by Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Further discussions in Martin G. Weiß, ed., *Bios und Zoë. Die menschliche Natur im Zeitalter ihrer technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009).

¹² Eckhardt Fuchs, “Nature and Bildung: Pedagogical Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 155–81.

¹³ We largely follow a systematic approach advanced in Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, “Nature,” in *Handbuch der Reformpädagogik in Deutschland (1890–1933)*, ed. Wolfgang Keim and Ulrich Schwerdt, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 425–48.

and pedagogical reflection. It has been viewed both as a method guiding educational practices and a standard by which to measure those practices. It is assumed that nature's "mode" of teaching and its "method" – using Rousseau's fixed points in the educational discussion – are to be followed. At the same time, nature has been defined as one of the aims of education insofar as education was defined as the creation of a second nature in humankind, a transformed nature, which produces "real" humans from untamed animal-like creatures. Many nuances and variations shaped the modern educational scene, from an anti-feudal point of view focusing on the "unnatural" stratification of society, to nature as an irrefutable determiner of a person's "natural" gifts and dispositions. Finally, nature has been a notorious argument within projects seeking a consistent reform of education and instruction. Nature has been not only a legitimising concept for different projects; it has also been a discursive weapon against the perceived "decay of values" and "evils" of society.

The power of education as an argument is impressively displayed in Shujun Yu's and Sun Yi's contribution on nature and education in Taoist thought during Pre-Qin China. They show how the purpose of education was still strongly related to a harmonic entanglement of nature and self. Regrettably the only contribution in this special issue coming from a non-Western context, the article shows how the argument that the "Way of Nature" should lead the self towards inner freedom was quite different from the Western and modern perspectives associated with Rousseau.¹⁴ Taoist in early China rather suggested that the reconciliation of the self through nature should also include society. With this turn, one of Rousseau's main tenets – the partial exclusion of society from the view of a natural education – can be referred to as a strongly individualised and Westernised option in discussing an education according to "nature". The roots of this individualised perspective have often been traced back to the Reformation in Europe and its upsetting changes to society, culture, and religion.¹⁵ The beginning of the Reformation is precisely the focus of Luana Salvarani's article in this volume. She interprets the two addresses by Martin Luther to the municipal authorities and to the householders as strategically using the motives of "human nature" and the "natural order" as ambivalent figurations. On the one hand, the world and humans themselves are the sites of sin. Yet the workings of education guarantee the natural order of society. These workings positioned education as a necessary tool that cannot redeem human nature itself, but can achieve something by reproducing the purportedly natural order of society. Still, nature could also be a leading idea in more radical and utopian educational projects. The quite optimistic and utopian use of nature in educational positionings is well developed in Yehuda Bitty's contribution on Zionist educational discourse. He discusses the idea of a return to nature that is central to the project of Zionism

¹⁴ Claude Habib, *Eduquer selon la nature: seize études sur Emile de Rousseau* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2012).

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Heinz D. Kittsteiner, *Die Entstehung des modernen Gewissens* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995).

as an idea related to the transformation of the diasporic Jew. Bitty argues that this shift also affects the very interpretation of the founding book of the Jews. In this sense, the use of nature as an argument is no longer about the reproduction of harmony or society, but about the radical transformation of collective identities.

Second, nature is a key *point of reference while constructing educational relationships and settings* and therefore plays a central role in educational practices. On the one hand, nature may be understood as a call to action for educators, highlighting those practices credited with advancing the nature of students, pupils, and children or at least pushing them to the limits of their learning capacities, yet on the other hand, nature also delineates the finite possibilities of education. One of the typically privileged sites for deploying this contradictory claim is physical education.¹⁶ Yet other positionings like phrenology were historically of relevance for negotiating potentials and boundaries of nature in relation to education.¹⁷ Discourses concerning nature and education vary widely in a historical perspective and include theories such as human nature being intrinsically ductile; the construction of the concept of intelligence primarily understood as a limit to the potential of individual development; all types of theories concerning giftedness; and contemporary discussions about the moral and legal right of educators to intervene with mechanical, chemical, and digital enhancement possibilities, including neuro-enhancement.¹⁸

The article by Sylvain Villaret shows how in the classic time of progress, cultivation and even the constitution of “society” and “culture” as the main categories for understanding humans and their education “nature” nonetheless increasingly persisted at the heart of educational discourses. He focuses on the emergence and spread of naturist movements in Europe and particularly in France from the nineteenth century until World War II. He shows how an educational interest was intrinsic to the consolidation of these movements and how specific educational programmes emerged. Both New Education and the movement favouring outdoor schools heavily received these impulses and even public schools became a site of naturist education during the Popular Front government in the 1930s. Nature as a background for

¹⁶ Jean-Michel Delaplace, “Un autre regard sur l’éducation physique et les sports en France avant 1914: Georges Hébert et les succès de la méthode naturelle,” in *Le sport en France de 1870 à 1940*, ed. André Gounot (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2001), 153–67.

¹⁷ Stephen Tomlinson, “Phrenology, Education and the Politics of Human Nature: The Thought and Influence of George Combe,” *History of Education* 26, no. 1 (1997): 1–22.

¹⁸ These themes have been rarely addressed by educational historians. For an exception, see Richard Aldrich, “Nature, Nurture and Neuroscience: Some Future Directions for Historians of Education,” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 6 (2014): 852–60.

constructing educational relationships also appears as fundamentally ambiguous in the analysis presented by Wilfried Göttlicher. His focus on rural spaces shows that all positive attributions related to the rural environment were relativised in view of the exposure to real nature. Issues like hygiene or the possible witnessing of unbounded animal sexuality were sources of considerable anxiety in Austria during the twentieth century. Schools and education, therefore, were responsible for guaranteeing an acceptable selection of those elements of the natural environment. The possibility that ambiguities in the relations between nature and education could lead to dichotomisations is a central point in Sébastien Laffage-Cosnier's article on a dichotomic school model travelling from France to Canada in the second half of the twentieth century. In this model of schooling, the division of the school day into two parts, one of them being spent in "nature", shows that educational relationships consequently oriented towards nature (or what is considered to be nature) are difficult to integrate in the classical setting of formal and separated schooling. The analysis of this process of educational transfer shows that the particular role played by nature in this concept was closely related to scientific reputation and expertise. In the last contribution to this theme, Maria Luce Sijpenhof advances a crucial analysis of the persistence of biologist and racist motives while constructing educational relationships. Drawing on very diverse materials, she shows continuities of racist notions through the role of colour-blind pedagogies in Dutch secondary schools in the late twentieth century. Third, "nature" continues to be perceived as *an educative tool* in itself. For instance, natural environments for learning have been reclaimed as being a counterbalance of the artificial environment of education. Here, green playgrounds, school gardens, the contemplation of forests and landscapes, the use of purportedly "responsive" animals in education and therapy are some of the remedies that have been discussed. Not only imagined nature in ideas and discourses, but elements and constellations of "real" nature have been integrated into educational arrangements. As recent approaches in environmental or animal history show, analysing education in purely social and cultural terms may be a shortcoming stemming from a persistent and dominant world view that only addresses humankind.

This is certainly a perspective that in the history of education has not hitherto played a major role. The humanistic tradition of educational studies may lead to perspectives where "real" nature is only considered in its constructedness and discursiveness. In this issue, two contributions look at nature as being educative itself in terms of perceptions and arguments, but they also address the issue of real nature as well. James Albisetti reconstructs the efforts launched by middle-class philanthropists engaged in sending poor and sick urban children to the countryside for summer vacations. He shows that both this problem and the remedies enacted by these groups were quite

transnational in outlook. Nature as a tool could restore children's health and enhance the possibility of a moral influence on them. Between healing and education, discussions existed about the right settings – homes or residencies – for this purpose. In Daniel Gerster's contribution to this volume, the question of boarding schools established in natural environments shows a case in point where the critique of bourgeois culture promoted the notion of the natural environment as the right place for education. His elaborated hypothesis of a shift from an inward-looking orientation towards "human nature" to a focus on "natural environment" within these circles also points out the quite uncertain meaning of the question of nature as an educational tool.

Finally, since the ascendance of a modern understanding of "science", the natural world has increasingly become part of the *content of teaching* and learning itself. This has occurred in all types and at all levels of schools, from kindergartens to universities, and includes not only formal educational institutions, but non-formal and informal educational practices as well. In particular, school subjects focusing on nature have markedly shaped and accelerated the consolidation of modern schooling as an agent of production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge working on the assumption that schools teach not only substantive but also disciplinary knowledge.¹⁹ But also questions related to the study of nature seem to have impacted historical notions about the very role of education.²⁰

In her nuanced exploration of Alexander von Humboldt's influence on geography for women and natural history education in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, Kim Tolley analysed a considerable sample of editions of geography books and botany school texts and shows how the concepts advanced by von Humboldt considerably impacted the knowledge conveyed by these books. Interestingly, Tolley shows that this impact was by no means circumscribed to the more specific concepts of natural geography such as climate and plants, but also included crucial entanglements between nature and humans including egalitarian and environmental issues. In his contribution, José Pedro Marín Murcia looks at the actual garden that Friedrich Froebel planned in his first established institution at Bad Blankenburg in 1838, that he consciously called Kindergarten/Garden for Children, and traces the echoes of these proposals in the establishment of a model kindergarten for teacher training in Madrid in 1879. As so often in transfer processes, the shape of the garden as an object of learning for children changed in the course of its introduction to Spain.

¹⁹ Kira Mahamud, "Mother Nature at the Service of the Fatherland: Scientific Knowledge in Primary Education Reading Books during the Franco Dictatorship (1939–1959)," *History of Education & Children's Literature* 7, no. 2 (2012): 259–85.

²⁰ Tal Gilead, "The Role of Education Redefined: Eighteenth Century British and French Educational Thought and the Rise of the Baconian Conception of Study of Nature," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 10 (2011): 1020–34.

The study of nature in its complexity certainly changed the complexity of teaching aids. This is one of the central premises in the analysis presented by Michael Markert, Wiebke Degler, Adrian Juen, and Kerrin Klinger. Following the institutionalisation of biology in the school curricula, the article reconstructs the different types of teaching aids and focuses on their materiality. Now more realistic representations are required, taxidermies became relevant for school and more complex wall charts entered the institutions.

Historians of education have selected from the huge variation of themes and meanings associated with “nature” some crucial, but still particular themes in their work. “Real” nature played a subordinate role in most of the works directly and explicitly addressing nature. An exception in this respect closes the collection of studies compiled in this volume. Nancy Beadie’s analysis of resource extraction and education funding follows a nexus in educational history that combines nature, economy, and the expansion of schooling. All institutions related to welfare and education are resource intensive ones, and Beadie reminds us that the much-admired expansion of schooling in the nineteenth-century United States was only possible due to processes of considerable resource exploitation and, of course, also through dispossession of the native population. In a time where ideas such as one laptop per child (in a world with 1289 million children and youths of school age!) are circulating,²¹ the questions of exploitation, depredation, and resources may advance to a central one when exploring the history of education in relation to nature.

Although the contributions to this special issue show the vitality of the field of history of education when dealing with the connections between education, schooling, and nature, new contexts such as the climate crisis and the exponential growth of knowledge about nature in all its forms may promote further fields of research. Alternative (mostly non-Western) concepts of nature²² may have consequences for the shaping of education; the question of human–animal relations²³ in families, schools, and even at work or during recreation²⁴ may give glimpses into forms of self-cultivation and learning crucial for the constitution of individual and group identities; the question of gardening as a tool for self-formation and a disciplining device²⁵ may reconsider the old theme of the educator as a gardener beyond the simple metaphorical use of this idea. Whereas newer historiographies may consider “nature” not only as an idea

²¹ Morgan G. Ames, *The Charisma Machine. The Life, Death, and Legacy of One Laptop per Child* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2019).

²² Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

²³ Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁴ Helen Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain. Empathy, Education, Entertainment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

²⁵ Hartwig Stein, *Inseln im Häusermeer. Eine Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kleingartenwesens bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs, reichsweite Tendenzen und Groß-Hamburger Entwicklung* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998).

and discourse, but also as a “real” context and phenomenon, this does not mean that naïve and ontologising concepts of nature should be used. As recent research by Lorraine Daston has shown, the concept of nature has been applied to any realm of human life for hundreds of years.²⁶ Therefore, research on nature of, for, and in education needs to be further contextualised within these other societal and cultural spaces.

Probably this last dilemma will shape future directions of historiography, also in the field of education. On the one hand, nature is still ubiquitous. This “Other” inhabits both the inside and the outside world as well as the spaces between them. It constitutes and pervades the human and, of course, the educational and the pedagogical. To address nature only in terms of construction or arguments in times of environmental stress and degradation does not fully apprehend the questions related to the crisis of the Anthropocene. Yet, on the other hand, nature is no longer what it used to be. Particularly human nature is no longer distinguishable due to the long history of its transformation and the unprecedented wealth of instruments for its shaping and manipulation. As a consequence, nature may not serve as a clear reference or norm for education. This major difficulty redefines the terms of the problem that Western modern societies adopted in recent centuries. Even if a plea to address “real” nature is implicitly built into the presentation of these contributions – a plea that not even all editors of this special issue completely share – this will be only stimulating for the historiography of education if a non-romanticised perspective on nature, including the analytical insights of history of science, environmental history, and the different historiographical turns related to constructivist theories, prevails. The contributions presented in this issue show that this task is not impossible, but only represents another challenge for the historian’s imagination, inspiration, and reflexivity.

²⁶ See most recently Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

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