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**'this so low a purpose':
Richard Mulcaster and the aims of public education in Sixteenth Century England.**

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There are not many different ways to conceive of what Norbert Elias calls 'the civilizing process'¹ in terms of Sixteenth Century grammar schooling. Even if the proclivities of a headmaster like Richard Mulcaster might have leaned in particular directions which were not completely at ease with the common doctrines of education, the authority of the state in its regulation meant that grammar school education was, as Mulcaster argued it should be, remarkably similar in terms of the content that was taught. Equally, the ways in which this content was taught, and the means by which students were guided to learn it, stuck to a model which can be traced to Cicero and Quintilian. What is remarkable, however, is the way in which variable natures were accommodated and responded to in educational theory and practice. There was clearly no attempt to stifle variability if it was found to be germane to ones' service to the state and public life in general. And the point of judgment, on which the relationship between education and variability meet, is key to consideration of variability and education today. What comes first, the preservation of an individual's nature or the turning of their nature to be of use in society? If the former, how do we avoid a situation where an individual falls between the cracks of society, finding themselves in prison or unemployed? If the latter, how can we ensure that the 'civilising process' does not create an extremely unhappy and unsatisfied person? These decisions fall to individual and often intuitive judgment of the teacher. The teacher-student relation is the location at which the civilising process comes most acutely under stress and is at the greatest need of a sensitivity towards variability, even if the aim of public education was uniformity.

In *Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, T.W. Baldwin provides a long and convincing analysis of Sixteenth Century grammar schooling and its profound direct and/or indirect influence on Shakespeare. What is ostensibly a book on Shakespeare, is also at one and the same time an ode to schooling, and especially Sixteenth Century English grammar schooling. Baldwin's respect for the influence the grammar school had on Shakespeare is at once a critique of those who locate his entire genius in his nature, as well as a reminder to teacher's of the significance of their task:

One does not acquire such knowledge and proficiency by inheritance, inspiration, transcendentalism, etc., etc. This is Art, not Nature. Critics may conceivably be forgiven for overlooking this fundamental fact, but schoolmasters cannot, for their very existence depends upon it.²

¹ Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation*, ed. Stephen Mennell, with Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Richard Kilminster (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2012).

² T.W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), 672.

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For Baldwin, 'the grammar school gave Shakspeare at least an elementary grasp upon the fundamental doctrine and method of literary composition in his day, the theory and practice of imitation' wherein the goal was to 'analyze the old that by imitative synthesis the old might be reincarnated in the new.'³ Baldwin then asks 'With our romantic theories of originality by transcendental inspiration, have we yet succeeded nearly so well?'⁴ We might then also ask, does a focus on variability in education – if it is at the cost of knowledge and proficiency – actually get in the way of educating variable natures to fruition?

Today we find it uncomfortable to conceive of education as being a civilising process, due to its various negative implications (the blinkered perception of the supremacy of Western civilization; problematic Enlightenment ideals; internal social hierarchies of nations), which usually ignore its contextual specificity. Perhaps even more disturbing to us, though, is the thought that public education exists to serve the state, rather than ourselves. But, as a reading of Richard Mulcaster - the originator of the term 'public education' – shows, this is a misconception of its history and purpose. For Mulcaster:

Education is the bringing up of one, not to live alone, but amongst others, (bycause companie is our natural cognisance) whereby he shall best be able to execute those doings in life, which the state of his calling shall employ him unto, whether *publike* abroad, or *private* at home, according unto the direction of his countrie whereunto he is borne, and oweth his whole service.⁵

His system, then, provides the means by which to think a version (or spurt, in Norbert Elias's terms⁶) of the 'civilising process' in Sixteenth Century England. It is little surprise that Merchant Taylor's School, for whom he was the first headmaster, have made reference to part of this quote in their recent Curriculum Policy document, designed to address the Independent Schools Inspectorate's Regulatory Requirements (effective from February, 2016) Part 1, Paragraph 2. (1) & (2).⁷ Mulcaster did not see schooling as being to do with 'anie naturall inclination, but of artificiall helps', which are '*reading, writing, drawing, singing, and playing*'⁸ (5; 27 *elementarie*). Therefore, even though Mulcaster was more explicitly drawn to physical education than most of his contemporaries, his conception of education was very much in fitting with that which Baldwin ascribes to grammar schooling in Sixteenth Century England in general. However, for Mulcaster the 'artificiall helps' that education provides are crucial in making the most of one's nature, regardless of its variability:

³ Baldwin, *Small Latine*, 677.

⁴ Baldwin, *Small Latine*, 678.

⁵ Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, ed. William Barker (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994), 186.

⁶ Elias, *Civilisation*, 422.

⁷ link

⁸ Richard Mulcaster, *Elementarie*, ed. E. T. Campagnac (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925) 5, 27.

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Take exercise awaie, what then is the bodie, but an vnweildie lump? what vse of it hath either cutrie [country] in defence, or it self in delite? Remoue precept and practis, and where then is vertew, which neither knoweth, what to do, if it be not directed, neither doth when it knoweth, if it fail of practis? Set these fiue principles apart, what can the vnlearned eie judge of? the untrained hand deal with? the vnframed voice please with?⁹

In terms of education today the prevailing feature of Mulcaster's educational theory and practice is its promotion of uniformity of means. This uniformity is the result of an acute awareness of the variability of individual teaching and learning contexts, the most significant issue within which, for Mulcaster, is bad teachers with bad methods. Variability of individuals is unquestionable for Mulcaster, arguing that '*nature engraffe private differences for distinction sake, as reason in man to part him from a beast, yet that difference remaineth one still, bycause there is none better.*'¹⁰ But preservation of these differences is not Mulcaster's concern, instead regarding public education as tool to bring children effectively into service of the state. The art of education does not eliminate the individual differences provided by nature, neither in terms of teacher or student. For Mulcaster, there will always be differences in teachers' judgements, but '*wheras difference in judgement worketh varietie: consent in knowledge will plant uniformitie.*'¹¹ Uniformity is an opportunity to increase the success of public education and ensure that, despite individual differences, an appropriate level of education is provided to students to make them of service to the state. The guiding principle for this uniformity is to educate so that each student, no matter their difference, would be taught a set body of content by teachers who used relatively similar methods of teaching:

Whereby all the youth of this whole Realme shalle seeme to have bene brought up in one school, and under one maister, both for the matter and manner of traine, though they differ in their own invention which is private and severall to every one by nature, though generall and one to every one by art.¹²

While Mulcaster might already be considered 'holistic' in terms of his interest in a broad range of educational subjects, especially physical education,¹³ he was also broadly of the mind that the 'soul' of the child could be observed and facilitated to grow by their own inclination through an educational process. He humbly suggests that he did not mean to

make any anatomie, or resolution of the soule his partes and properties, a discourse, not belonging to this so low a purpose, but onely to pick out some natural inclinations in the soule, which as they seeme to crave helpe of education, and

⁹ Mulcaster, *Elementarie*, 29.

¹⁰ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 187.

¹¹ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 261.

¹² Mulcaster, *Positions*, 260.

¹³ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 51.

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nurture, so by education, and nurture, they do prove very profitable, both in private and in publicke.¹⁴

The inclinations of the soul are, then, located specifically to be helped by education in becoming more profitable to the state and also to the individual person. Despite the fact that inclinations of the soul to be of profit in private is likely to be very much a secondary concern for Mulcaster, he sees 'the soule and bodie being comparteners in good and ill, in sweete and sowre, in mirth and mourning, and having general a common sympahthie, and a mutuall feeling in all passions.'¹⁵ Thus, not to take the soul into account in the educational process might potentially upset the inner workings of children and make them less effective servants of the state and of themselves. However, this concern for the soul should not be overestimated in Mulcaster's educational theory. There are few pointers given on how to attend to the soul, beyond those already recounted and he warns his reader to focus more explicitly on the body as

the powers of the soule come to no prooffe, or to verie small, if they cannot be fostered by their naturall traine, but wither and dye, like corne not reaped, but suffered to rotte by negligence of the owner, or by contention in challenge¹⁶

And though Mulcaster states that 'I deale with the bodie but once, and that onely here, wheras I entreat of the soule, and the furniture therof in what so ever I meddle with, in my whole course hereafter,'¹⁷ it is not entirely clear that he does so. The soul receives little further mention in the text, suggesting that Mulcaster either intended to write further on it and then did not, or, more likely, that he assumed attention to the soul was given more generally through all intellectual rather than physical educational pursuits. This suggestion leads to a further implication, which is that if we are to think of intellectual education as attending to the soul in general, then attention to individual souls has been left by Mulcaster up to individual judgement, rather than uniform practice. However, this individual judgement is still at the behest of a uniform aim: the enhancement of an individual's capacity for public service. In the *Elementarie* Mulcaster writes that 'publik vse...is the naturall vse of all learning,'¹⁸ to only turn inwards and towards one's own interest with one's learning is 'the priuat abuse of a publik good.'¹⁹ Although 'if infirmitie let his choice then infirmitie is his pardon.'²⁰

Public education in Sixteenth Century England had none of our contemporary romantic trappings which promote the educational growth of the individual as their priority. A sensitivity towards variability or physical and mental disability was required, not to reward and facilitate difference, but rather to respond differently to produce a relatively uniform result. However, this sensitivity to variability should not be underestimated, especially in

¹⁴ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 38.

¹⁵ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 51.

¹⁶ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 51.

¹⁷ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 52.

¹⁸ Mulcaster, *Elementarie*, 13.

¹⁹ Mulcaster, *Elementarie*, 14.

²⁰ Mulcaster, *Elementarie*, 14.

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terms of Richard Mulcaster's educational theory. Uncommonly among his contemporaries, he was deeply concerned with physical education and wrote extensively on the subject in *Positions*. His interest in this subject provoked him to expand on the physical variability of students otherwise ignored in educational texts in Sixteenth Century England:

Now as all constitutions be not of one and the same mould, and as all partes be not moved alike, with any one thing: so the exercise must alter, and be appropriate to each: that both the constitution may be continued in her best kinde, and all the partes preserved to their best use, which exercises being compared among themselves one to an other, be more or lesse, but being applyed to the partie kepe alwayes in a meane, when they meane to do good.²¹

This sensitivity to physical variability in an educational context indicates a desire to adapt the means to be able to better reach the end. Influenced by Galenic thought, Mulcaster understands that ignoring physical variability can obstruct educational success. Interestingly, physical variability is never described as problematic, but rather as a given, to be taken into account through educational means. This is not the case for Mulcaster's evaluation of the 'kinde of witte I like best for my country.'²² Unlike physical variability, intellectual variability becomes one of the loci for a practical judgement on whether or not a child should be admitted to school: 'it seemeth to me verie plaine that all children be not to be set to schoole, but onely such as for naturall wittes, and sufficient maintenance.'²³ For Mulcaster there is a 'want of provision', leading him to ask, rhetorically, 'For the rowmes which are to be supplied by learning being within number, if they are to supply them, grow on beyond number, how can yt be but too great a burden for any state to beare?'²⁴ Mulcaster's dilemma is not our own; there is not only sufficient provision but that provision is itself enforced on students in England up until the age of eighteen. However, Mulcaster's stratification of 'wittes' does play into the contemporary arguments of selection and streaming, as well as posing a dangerous question to our contemporary norms: should we be schooling everyone, even if we can afford the provision? And does a sensitivity to variability endorse rather than proscribe such a perspective? The rhetoric of contemporary education has moved a long way from Mulcaster's definition of its purpose as being the building of individual capacities for service of the state. Social mobility, equality of opportunity, and individual flourishing, are the words with most purchase in the contemporary educational debate. And yet, is it truly possible to believe that these are the aims of contemporary public education? Or is it rather that the notion of an education designed to 'civilise' and provide one with the capacity for public service might be unsavoury to the general public?

Juan de Vives, a leading humanist intellectual cited by Mulcaster in *Positions*,²⁵ pioneered this civilising aspect of education. In *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social*

²¹ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 56.

²² Mulcaster, *Positions*, 145.

²³ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 145.

²⁴ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 139.

²⁵ Mulcaster, *Positions*, 256.

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Order, Margo Todd explains that 'Vives' works on education had consistently argues that society can be improved to a significant degree by laws and teaching which repress man's evil impulses and foster his good ones.²⁶ This perspective, as Todd shows, was hugely popular and influential in England, Vives significantly outselling (both in Latin and in English translation) other similar authors in the same time period, such as Thomas More.²⁷ Richard DeMolen details the influence of Vives on Mulcaster in his *Richard Mulcaster and Educational Reform in the Renaissance*²⁸ and argues, 'In contrast to Vives and Mulcaster, Erasmus, Elyot, Ascham, and Montaigne focused their attention on society's privileged few.'²⁹ Thus, however unpopular Mulcaster (and Vives) view, that that education should primarily be directed towards social welfare, might be in terms of contemporary rhetoric, they were themselves combatting an even less socially generous form of educational practice.

In Norbert Elias' famous formulation, it is not difficult to evaluate the relative success or failure of what he calls the 'civilising process,' which we can see in Mulcaster and Sixteenth Century grammar schooling in England. Elias writes that:

In the successful case, after all the pains and conflicts of this process, patterns of conduct well adapted to the framework of adult social functions are finally formed, an adequately functioning set of habits and at the same time – which does not necessarily go hand in hand with it – a positive pleasure balance. In the unsuccessful, either the socially necessary self-control is repeatedly purchased – at a heavy cost in personal satisfaction – by a major effort to overcome opposed libidinal energies, or the control of the these energies, the renunciation of their satisfaction is not achieved at all; and quite often no positive pleasure balance of any kind is finally possible, because the social commands and prohibitions are represented not only by other people but also by the stricken self, since one part of it forbids and punished what the other desires.³⁰

Elias does not attack or defend the 'civilising process' but rather outlines its tendencies and presents evidence to support his claims. He also does not suggest that there are many individuals for whom the civilising process is particularly 'favourable or unfavourable', arguing instead that there are 'relatively few cases at the end of each scale. The majority of civilised people live midway between these two extremes. Socially positive and negative features, personally gratifying and frustrating tendencies, mingle in them in varying proportions.'³¹ As such, the 'civilising process' affects individuals variably and forms variable individuals. Equally, there are, of course, variable means of civilising people (different families, schools, communities, jobs, courts and prisons). These statements rest at the

²⁶ Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 40.

²⁷ Todd, *Christian Humanism*, 94.

²⁸ Richard DeMolen, *Richard Mulcaster (c.1531–1611) and Educational Reform in the Renaissance* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1991), 45-52, 92-96.

²⁹ DeMolen, *Mulcaster*, 49.

³⁰ Elias, *Civilisation*, 416-417.

³¹ Elias, *Civilisation*, 417.

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precipice of the platitudinous. However, drawing attention to these facts allows for a consideration of why it might be appropriate to civilise (for example, to avoid religious strife or educate employable citizens), who has made arguments in favour of the civilising process (Mulcaster has been our model), what were their means of civilising (the grammar school), and how did they account for variability, during and at the end of this process. For Mulcaster the response to this final concern is the most pertinent in terms of variability. In his argument, uniformity in teaching methods reduces the likelihood of bad teaching, and increases the likelihood of being able to respond to variable natures in a manner which will develop them most effectively for public service. Elias does not see the civilising process as following a 'straight line' of linear development.³² It is instead a long sequence of 'spurts and counter-spurts.'³³ One of the contemporary features of which is the diminishing contrast between upper and working classes.³⁴ One does not have to look too hard to see Richard Mulcaster as one of the more notable representatives of the civilising spurt that was Sixteenth Century grammar schooling in England. But in looking a little closer, it is also clear that this 'so low a purpose' – of directing public education towards public service – has an attentiveness to variability as its prerequisite.

³² Elias, *Civilisation*, 423.

³³ Elias, *Civilisation*, 422.

³⁴ Elias, *Civilisation*, 423.