

Concentration and civilisation: producing the attentive child in the age of Enlightenment

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The problem of how best to capture, direct, and enhance children's abilities to pay attention has been a central feature of educational thought and practices over a long duration. And, while having students pay attention in class has been a concern of teachers across the ages, beginning in the Enlightenment we find a significant shift in educational literature and practice where the child's attention appears less and less as a simple passing reference and is no longer merely seen as an aid to instruction but becomes central to numerous educational projects. This article examines the educational writings of John Locke (1632–1704), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), and Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849) as a tactic for illuminating the categories that were embedded in theory and practice around the child's attention in the "long" eighteenth century. These three popular advice-giving writers allow us to track changes and continuities in pedagogic conceptualisations of children's attentiveness. The article's examination of pedagogic theory shows us how consequential educational inequalities can be produced at an epistemic level, in the educational knowledge that identifies children and their potentialities as learners.

Keywords: pedagogy; attentiveness; eighteenth century; John Locke; Maria Edgeworth; Jean-Jacques Rousseau

To help illustrate the care that must be taken in teaching children and to emphasise the necessity of properly directing and managing their attentiveness, the Anglo-Irish novelist and educational writer Maria Edgeworth drew several comparisons with non-European peoples. In her 1798 book *Practical Education*, she maintained that unnecessarily causing fatigue should be a great concern of educators. In making the point that any mode of instruction that tired the attention was hurtful to children, Edgeworth offered the example of several Native American Inuit ("Esquimaux") who had been brought to London a few decades earlier. One morning these first-time visitors were taken on a walk through London, which made them "uncommonly melancholy and stupified [sic]". Back home in their temporary accommodations they sat in a stupor, "faces between their hands", until one finally cried out that there was "too much smoke – too much noise – too much houses – too much men – too much everything!". Edgeworth used this incident to remind her readers that too much novelty is to be avoided. Her reasoning was that people can, of course, pay attention only to one thing at a time. And, because children can appear resistant to repetition, teachers naturally should vary things. However, educators should always be mindful of the fact that, while variety "relieves the mind", the objects "which are varied must not all be

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entirely new”, for novelty and variety, when joined, “fatigue the mind”.¹ The example of a group of Inuit visitors becoming overwhelmed by all they saw in London helped make the case that the teaching of children needed to follow carefully considered methods, needed to evidence concern for appropriateness and proper sequencing, and needed to be guided by consideration for forms of teaching that would be empowering and enabling, not fatiguing or disabling.

In Edgeworth’s work, and in other educational treatises from the eighteenth century, the attention of the child appears as a key site for pedagogical work and interventions. To be sure, concern for how best to capture, direct, and enhance children’s abilities to pay attention has been a central feature of educational thought and practices for a long time. Yet, beginning in the Enlightenment there was a significant shift. The child’s attention appears less and less as a simple passing reference and was no longer merely seen as an aid to instruction. What attention represented, where it was found, and how it could be properly used increasingly became the target of educational endeavours: the object or surface that educators could target when trying to form specific kinds of persons and particular kinds of social order. Conceptualisations of the child’s attention in the eighteenth century were far from uniform. In different ways, people grappled with desirable kinds of “rational”, “steady” attention as well as with the “stupid” and “paralysing” forms of attentiveness that were to be avoided. Silent, fixed concentration might be empowering and generative of deep insights. In other instances, it might be linked to madness and mental and physical collapse. Yet, amid the many Enlightenment-era statements on how the attentive child was to be produced – and why this was important – we regularly find notions of attentive capabilities being used to designate certain groups and kinds of people as “ineducable” and mark others as “educable”. These distinctions, in turn, had a profound impact on educational opportunities made available to girls, the poor, and so-called “primitive” peoples. This article examines the educational writings of John Locke (1632–1704), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), and Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849) as a tactic for illuminating the categories that were embedded in theory and practice around the child’s attention in the “long” eighteenth century. I use these three popular advice-giving writers to track changes and continuities in pedagogic conceptualisations of children’s attentiveness. In keeping with the theme of this special issue, I argue that this examination of pedagogical theory shows us how consequential educational inequalities can be produced at an epistemic level, in the educational knowledge that identifies children and their potentialities as learners.

In the early eighteenth century, attention was often conceptualised as a virtue, the cultivation of which was seen to advance spiritual and moral development. Over the course of the century, and in convergence with other Enlightenment projects, attention became understood as a vehicle for introspection and the necessary starting point for planned activity. The historian of science Michael Hagner proposes that as reason became increasingly important so too did attention. The self-direction of one’s attentiveness was, he proposes, the key mechanism by which the reasoning mind could maintain the position it deemed correct. Changing the focus of one’s attention also allowed reasonable people to change their courses of action when this became

¹Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education (Complete in One Volume)* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 66.

necessary.² As will be seen below in greater detail (and as is seen in the above discussion of the Inuit visitors being unable to properly control their attentions) Edgeworth's writings support Hagner's claim that "around 1800, attention made us the masters of exploring ourselves and the world that surrounds us"³ – presuming that the "us" in question is understood as "civilised" Europeans and North Americans. The increasing importance placed on the role that attention played in self-mastery and the mastery of others can be witnessed in the development of educational thought across the eighteenth century. From the early writings of John Locke to later writings by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others there is a subtle but significant shift from the child's attention being primarily discussed as something that enabled adult-directed instruction to children's powers of concentration *also* being understood as something needing deliberate cultivation for the purpose of developing independent, self-governing individuals.

Methodologically, by seizing on one particular pedagogical element and tracing the different forms it takes, this study has many affinities with the German *Begriffsgeschichte* "conceptual history" approach.⁴ This article is part of a larger project that examines how the child's attention has been understood over time. My main argument here is that in the eighteenth century attention or attentiveness became one of the key qualities that differentiated humans – both from animals and from one another. The educational advice/how-to manuals produced by the three figures I examine clearly reveal how systems of knowledge define educational problems and solutions, and – when the attention of the child is put under scrutiny – how distinctions having to do with civilisation and social order produced normative categories and systems of inclusion and exclusion, certain features of which may well persist in contemporary educational theory and practice.

John Locke: getting and keeping the attention of scholars

"The great skill of a teacher", John Locke wrote in his 1693 educational treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, "is to get and keep the attention of his scholar".⁵ Even though the overriding concern of his pedagogy was that individuals come to self-government and internalise the virtues necessary to live productively in civil society, Locke approached the child's attention primarily as something that the teacher needed to manage. Unlike what we will see later in Rousseau and Edgeworth, Locke did not discuss the control of one's own attention as one of the cornerstones of self-regulation. Nonetheless, many of Locke's notions regarding sensory attention to external objects as well as his presuppositions about the limitations of the child's initial attentiveness had a profound influence on later writers.

In the standard history of education monographs, Locke is (justifiably) discussed in connection with the seminal reversal of the view that the child was sinful by nature. When their minds were viewed as *tabulae rasae*, children could appear eminently

²Michael Hagner, "Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science", *MLN* 18, no. 3 (2003): 670–88 (p. 673).

³*Ibid.*, 686.

⁴See, e.g., Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

⁵John Locke, *Some thoughts concerning education*. 9th ed. (London: A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, J. Pemberton, and E. Symon, 1732), 253.

malleable, instead of needing correction from day one. This placed new burdens on adult caretakers, who themselves could be blamed for “spoiling” children at the same time as they were charged with bringing them to virtuous maturity. Yet all was not blank when the Lockean child-as-traveller entered its new world. In Locke’s view, children possess inherent capacities, powers of attention among them. At the outset, however, these are the powers of a mind that is “narrow and weak”.⁶ Their minds are “disposed to wander”, Locke wrote, adding:

Novelty alone takes them; whatever that presents, they are presently eager to have a Taste of, and are as soon satiated with it. They quickly grow weary of the same things, and so have almost their whole Delight in Change and Variety. It is a Contradiction to the natural State of Childhood for them to fix their fleeting Thoughts.⁷

Locke is not conclusive on the cause of this, but he hypothesises that the difficulty that children have in steadily fixing their thoughts might be due to the “Temper of their Brains” or to the “Instability of their animal Spirits, over which the Mind has not yet got a full Command”. Still, the power of directing one’s attention is one that the “infinite Wise author” has bestowed upon us and it is key to what makes human understanding *human* understanding even if it is a faculty that needs to be strengthened.

As is well known, Locke distinguished between ideas that come to us from things around us and ideas that come to us through our mental operations. Attention had a pivotal role to play both in perceiving the outside world and in introspection. In Locke’s psychology, exterior causes affect our senses, thus producing perceptions. If understanding begins by external objects furnishing the mind with perceptions, and the mind creates ideas through its own operations on these perceptions, the specific objects one is exposed to become extremely significant. “Men then come to be furnished with fewer or more simple *Ideas* from without, according as the *Objects*, they converse with, afford greater or less variety”, Locke writes in his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Given my mention earlier of the eighteenth-century Inuit visitors to London, it is worth remarking that this notion undergirds the view that indigenous “uncivilised” peoples were *simple* because in such societies people were exposed to fewer objects. This notion, that “primitive peoples” direct their attention to a small number of objects, was widely circulated in the eighteenth century.⁸ Additionally, it helps us to understand the comparisons that were often drawn between the child and the savage. Locke explains that because children enter this “world of new things” with, as noted above, “minds disposed to wander”, the first few years of life are usually used in looking “abroad”, by which he means that:

Men’s Business in [the early years of life] is to acquaint themselves with what is to be found without; and so growing up in constant attention to outward Sensations, seldom make any considerable Reflection on what passes within them, till they come to be of riper years; and some scarce ever at all.⁹

⁶Ibid., 250.

⁷Ibid., 251.

⁸See, e.g., John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*. 3rd ed. (London: J. Murray, 1781), 3.

⁹John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell (New York: Dover Publications, 1690/1959), Book II, Ch. I §8.

In the Lockean schema, the critical task then is to ensure that children do in fact fully come to reason, that they mature, begin to move beyond the world of objects, reflect on their own mental operations, and turn understanding “inward upon itself”. For purposes of introspection, the power to choose to what external objects we will attend¹⁰ extends to an ability of the mind “to choose amongst its ideas, which it will think on”.¹¹

An additional factor is necessary, however, for Locke to be able to explain (and ensure) the proper unfolding of mental operations: the universal sensations of pain and pleasure. Without them, humans would be “very idle unactive Creature[s]” who passed their time in “lazy lethargic dream[s]”.¹² Instead, these entwined phenomena give us incentive to prefer one thought to another; they also play an integral role in Locke’s pedagogic prescriptions. For the pupils discussed in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke advised the tutor to appeal to pleasure as much as possible.

Pain was to be avoided in both the utilisation and procurement of attention. Locke acknowledged that deep concentration might be potentially quite painful. The tutor was thus to take extreme care that whatever he proposed should be “as grateful and agreeable as possible”.¹³ Along these lines, Locke was critical of tutors who used corporal means or harsh criticism to keep the attention of their charges:

’Tis, I know, the usual Method of Tutors, to endeavor to procure Attention in their Schol-ars, and to fix their Minds to the Business in Hand, by Rebukes and Corrections if they find them ever so little wandering.¹⁴

This typically produces the opposite effect, Locke proposed. “Hasty or imperious words” and “blows from the Tutor” cause the child to “lose the Sight of what he was upon” and fill his mind with “disorder and confusion, and in that State [he is] no longer capable of Attention to any thing else”.¹⁵ In procuring attention, the tutor was to play on the child’s reasoning abilities. The child was to comprehend the “usefulness” of what the tutor was teaching: “let him see, by what he has learnt, that he can do something, which gives him some Power and real Advantage above others who are ignorant of it”. Alongside this Locke recommended “tenderness”, “sweetness”, and “love” as important for getting children to fix their minds on the business at hand.

Locke’s pedagogic formulas and techniques for working with pain and pleasure were radically different, however, when it came to educating the children of the poor. It bears remembering that *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was addressed to Locke’s close friend Edward Clarke, a member of parliament, and that the book was intended to describe the education of children from elite social backgrounds. A different view of the child’s attentiveness and of the use of corporal punishment emerges in Locke’s 1697 “Proposals for Bringing up Children of Paupers”. In this report, written when he was serving as a commissioner of trade and plantations, Locke proposed to revise the Elizabethan Poor Law to set up parish-level working schools. These schools would not, of course, teach Latin and Greek but would focus on manual skills. Any

¹⁰For example, Locke remarks on the human ability to shut out sounds when engrossed in watching something.

¹¹Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Book II, Chap. VII §3.

¹²Ibid. Book II, Chap. VII §3.

¹³Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 251.

¹⁴Ibid., 252.

¹⁵Ibid.

children found begging would “be sent to the next working school, there to be soundly whipped and kept at work till evening”. This would, Locke thought, help address the problem of idleness. Idleness was a concern also addressed in *Some Thoughts*, however in this text the “sauntering” child was to be reasoned with and taught to take pleasure in application and industry. Poor children, it appears, could have their wanderings beaten out of them. The historian Peter Gay notes that in certain circles in Locke’s time the poor were barely considered human,¹⁶ an observation that goes some of the way to explaining this apparent contradiction. Locke is, after all, celebrated in many accounts for downplaying innate differences and emphasising the potential of education to bring all people to reason. Nonetheless, it is evident that getting and keeping the attention of scholars was indeed a very different process from getting and keeping the attention of the poor.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: a due and rational attention

Like Locke did for certain children, Jean-Jacques Rousseau advised that his pupil’s attention “is never required upon compulsion”. With the 1762 publication of *Emile: or, On Education*, Rousseau offered a remarkably imaginative design for how the ideal citizen might be raised – a citizen who was both truly independent and able to live in society. Similar to “getting and keeping the attention of scholars”, in *Emile* Rousseau speaks to the importance of regulating the child’s attention. Yet, with Rousseau, we have moved a considerable ways from the teacher’s interest in the child’s attention merely being craft knowledge that prepares the child to be moulded as the educator desires. Attention itself is now an end in and of itself. It is one of the things that teachers should produce in their charges.

If attention upon compulsion was undesirable, so, for Rousseau, was the “stupid attention” that so many inexperienced nurses fomented in their charges. As education historian Bernadette Baker has pointed out, “bumbling” women are one of the great obstacles Rousseau faces.¹⁷ It is quite commonplace, Rousseau wrote in *Emile*, for nurses to divert upset children by showing them “some agreeable and striking object”. This in and of itself was fine as long as children did not catch on that the intent was to divert their attention; instead, “he [*sic*] should imagine we are amusing ourselves without thinking of him”. And, Rousseau adds, “in this respect, all nurses are very inexperienced and perversely do a right thing the wrong way”.¹⁸ Bumbling women could also be blamed for exposing infants to too much language.¹⁹ To do so was to risk accustoming children to be content with things they did not understand and not to ask questions and inquire further: “The school boy listens to the gabbling usher of his class, with the same stupid attention as he did to the prattle of his nurse.”²⁰ Stupid attention was a passive, uncomprehending attention, if anything only the appearance of concentration.

¹⁶Peter Gay, “Locke on the education of paupers”, in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge, 1998), 191.

¹⁷Bernadette Baker, *In Perpetual Motion: Theories of Power, Educational History, and the Child* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

¹⁸Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emilius and Sophia: or, A New System of Education*, trans. William Kenrick. 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: R. Griffiths, T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt, 1762), 82.

¹⁹“The first words repeated in the hearing of an infant should be few, easy and distinct.” *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Rousseau instead desires “a due and rational attention”. Recall that learning is not to be forced upon Emile; he is to learn through his own discoveries and curiosity. This strategy means that Emile:

... accustomed to receive no assistance till he has discovered his own inabilities, will examine every new object with a long and silent attention. He will be thoughtful without asking questions. Content yourself, therefore, with presenting proper objects opportunely to his notice, and when you see they have sufficiently excited his curiosity, drop some leading laconic questions, which may put him in the way of discovering the truth.²¹

Note that this makes the teacher’s role to pose questions but, perhaps even more importantly, to “present proper objects opportunely”. At a later point in *Emile*, Rousseau elaborates on this, noting that a “judiciously” chosen object will inspire Emile “with tenderness and afford him reflection for a whole month”.²² Here, of course, we have an echoing of Lockean associationist psychology. What seems to be important for Rousseau is how the nature of the interaction with the objects affects our permanent impressions of them. The key thing to remember is that the child should not be overwhelmed but should be educated with one object at a time:

Let us convert our sensations into ideas; but let us not fly at once from sensible to intellectual objects. It is by a due and rational attention to the former that we can only attain the latter. In the first operations of the understanding, let our senses then always be our guide, the world our only book, and facts our sole precepts.²³

Due and rational attention to objects – we also saw this as long, silent attention – is starting to take on considerable importance. After all, stupid attention would fail to produce freedom in society.

Extensive scholarship in recent years, particularly among philosophers of education, has usefully directed attention to the last quarter of *Emile*, which discusses the education of Sophie, the young woman raised to be Emile’s wife. Jane Roland Martin has influentially argued that Sophie is no mere afterthought, rather the assistance she provides Emile is a necessary component of Rousseau’s effort to craft Emile’s freedom and Emile’s ability to live autonomously within society.²⁴ Ingrid Lohmann and Christine Meyer have recently argued that the eighteenth-century anthropology of gender allowed Enlightenment thinkers otherwise committed to natural law and equality to countenance and elaborate a different set of schooling opportunities and pedagogic methods to be applied to girls.²⁵ For Rousseau, gender differences hinged on biological reproduction; women’s nature purportedly gave them “presence of mind, incisiveness, and subtle observations”. It also made them connivingly clever. Though Emile was to rise above the social pressures that might impinge upon his freedom, Rousseau was comfortable seeing Sophie “enslaved by public opinion”.²⁶ This

²¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emilius and Sophia: or, A New System of Education*, 14–15.

²²*Ibid.*, 187.

²³*Ibid.*, 10–11.

²⁴Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

²⁵Ingrid Lohmann and Christine Mayer, “Dimensions of Eighteenth-century Educational Thinking in Germany: Rhetoric and Gender Anthropology,” *History of Education* 37, no. 1 (2008): 113–39.

²⁶Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1762/1979), 385,77.

difference has enormous consequence for how Rousseau worked attention into Sophie's education.

The due and rational attention paid to objects that Rousseau proposed to be fundamental for Emile's upbringing does not appear as an important consideration for Sophie. Instead of cultivating her powers of attention, Sophie is to make herself into an object of attention. Among the many differences that Rousseau inscribed between Emile and Sophie, we find that "he needs knowledge to speak; she needs taste". Silent concentration and insight would lead Emile to knowledge that could eventually be manifested by speech. In contrast, women have "flexible tongues", and by nature "they talk sooner, more easily, and more attractively than men".²⁷ Rousseau opines that young girls learn to "chatter attractively so quickly" so that they can entertain men and earn their affections:

... it is by speech that the mind inspires sustained attention and keeps it focused with the same interest on the same objects for a long time ... men are entertained by listening to [girls] at so early an age, even before the girls themselves are able to understand them[selves].²⁸

What Sophie says should please; Emile should say what he knows. Out of this arise two starkly different constellations of teaching methods. Sophie is taught to communicate tastefully so that she comes to understand her own sentiments and refine the skills of *decent* coquetry. Emile is taught to reason then to speak. Self-mastery and self-discipline is important for each, but this is to be achieved in radically different ways and for radically different purposes. This is a useful reminder that in educational practice we expect children to pay attention and to be paid attention to, though this can (and should, as Rousseau would have it) play out differently by gender.

Maria Edgeworth: the labour of attention

An entire chapter in the 1798 book *Practical Education* is devoted to the subject of the child's attention. The chapter's author, Maria Edgeworth, was an English-born novelist and later long-time resident of Ireland. She was the daughter of the inventor and politician Richard Lovell Edgeworth and assisted her father in the upbringing of his 21 other children (with four wives). Largely on the basis of their family's own experiences, the two of them jointly authored *Practical Education*, with Richard Edgeworth contributing seven of the 25 chapters and Maria authoring the rest, including the portions of the book that concerned attention. The book falls into the popular genre of letters to parents and was one of the most important works on pedagogy of the period.²⁹ From Locke's time this literature had, of course, now changed – and Rousseau was a pivotal, transitional figure in this – from advice to fathers into advice to mothers.

"To fix the attention of children ... must be our first objective in the early cultivation of understanding", Edgeworth wrote. She is quite clear on the stakes involved in this project:

²⁷Ibid., 376.

²⁸Ibid., 375–76.

²⁹Alice Patterson, *The Edgeworths: A Study of Later Eighteenth Century Education* (London: University Tutorial Press, 1914), 7; Brian Simon, *Studies in the History of Education, 1780–1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1960), 89.

When dissipated habits are acquired, the pupil loses power over his own mind; and, instead of vigorous voluntary exertion, which he should be able to command, he shows that wayward imbecility which can think successfully only by fits and starts: this paralytic state of mind has been found to be one of the greatest calamities attendant on what is called genius: and injudicious education creates or increases this disease.³⁰

In framing attentiveness as retaining “power over [one’s] own mind”, Edgeworth is conceptualising attention as a form of self-possession. For her it is, predictably, also key to instruction. To fix the attention of children is “in other words, to interest them about those subjects to which we wish them to apply”.³¹ Edgeworth has great concern about fatigue and degeneration, the fear being that a dissipation of human powers will interfere with children being properly occupied with the matters of the world that (adults think) are of true importance to them. To address this, Edgeworth counselled that the parent/teacher not expect “two efforts of attention at the same time”. For example, not to ask the child to learn terms for an object and simultaneously compare it with other objects. The effort, exertion, and labour of attentiveness repeatedly crops up as a theme in *Practical Education*: when encountering new things “we generally exert more attention than is necessary”.³² She also warns that too often children are fatigued by overstrained and misplaced efforts to introduce them to many new subjects.

Nonetheless, Edgeworth does not set out simply to obliterate the strains and pains that accompany sustained attention. In fact, in what appears to be a reference to Rousseau’s more avid devotees, she dismisses “the fashion of late” of trying to teach children only through play, noting that in recent years “ingenious people have contrived to insinuate much useful knowledge without betraying the design to instruct”.³³ Her concern was that indulging children’s (natural) desire for amusement can cause the mind to become passive and indolent. In a statement that exudes bourgeois self-fashioning, she declared:

The truth is, that useful knowledge cannot be obtained without labour; that attention long continued is laborious, but that without this labour nothing excellent can be accomplished.... When children are interested about any thing, whether it be about what we call a trifle, or a matter of consequence, they will exert themselves in order to succeed; but from the moment the attention is fixed, no matter on what, children are no longer at idle play, they are at active work.³⁴

This redefinition of play allowed Edgeworth to decry both teaching children through frivolous play and making learning a task. Managing the child’s attention was no simple matter. It was important that the teacher not increase excitement to produce attention; better was to vary one’s strategies, alternatively to employ sympathy, curiosity, praise, and blame, as appropriate. Educators were also to customise their strategies for different children.

³⁰Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education (Complete in One Volume)*, 49.

³¹*Ibid.*, 52.

³²*Ibid.*, 69.

³³*Ibid.*, 49. On Edgeworth’s critiques of Rousseau see, Catherine Toal, “Control Experiment: Edgeworth’s Critique of Rousseau’s Educational Theory,” in *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*, ed. Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske, 212–34 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004).

³⁴Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education (Complete in One Volume)*, 50–1.

For Edgeworth, the labours of attention ultimately had to be accepted if “excellence” was to be achieved. Like self-discipline and self-control, attention was to be rendered voluntary, a form of self-governance that would persist long after one’s schooling was complete. Successfully educated children should, despite the difficulty, “feel the advantages of a command of attention . . . whenever they apply to any profession, to literature, or science”.³⁵ Those who lacked a solid command of attention, such as the Inuit visitors discussed at the outset of this article, would be too fatigued by the demands and distractions of the modern world and would fail to comprehend – let alone contribute to – progress. Properly developing and deploying one’s attention could become, then, a quality that distinguished those fitted to the civilised world from those pushed to its margins.

Conclusion – inequalities inscribed in attentive capacities

Desirable modes of perception and attentive states can vary widely according to particular social settings. Human diversity and the diversity of social conditions mean that radically different kinds of demands can be placed on how humans attend to the world and its objects, as well as to their own introspective thoughts. In fact, the Inuit inability to make sense of the bustle and size of late eighteenth-century London is quite reasonable and predictable. A group of Native Americans coming to London in 1773, directly from Labrador and directly from a fishing, fur-trapping, and seal-hunting mode of life would, in fact, be confronted with sights, sounds, and smells completely removed from their previous horizon of experience. It is, then, no surprise that the visit was disorienting. Even though, as is frequently pointed out, comparisons with Non-European peoples regularly fed into eighteenth-century Europeans’ attempts to define and understand themselves, much more is going on in this instance than merely discursive positioning or textual “othering” practices. How to make sense of urban space and living was, after all, a question Europeans themselves faced and would continue to face across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, one can think of Baudelaire’s *flâneur/euse* who moved through the city in a state of detachment, refusing to let him- or herself be drawn in by the commercial attractions – a form of spectatorship that inspired the theoretical stance Walter Benjamin proposed as best suited for getting a critical grip on the modern world.³⁶ The problem of human attention is very much a problem related to the complexity, speed, and overabundance of objects in modern life.³⁷

³⁵Ibid., 92.

³⁶Benjamin argued that modernity presented people with excess stimuli and destroyed earlier visual forms of unity and integration. In the face of this loss, and to develop defensive mechanisms against modernity’s attractions, Benjamin proposed that the social critic needed to have the leisurely nonchalance and distance of someone who could stroll through urban space without getting overwhelmed. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968).

³⁷This is an argument used by Jonathan Crary, who applies it to the end of the nineteenth century. Here, however, I am arguing that this applies to London in the late eighteenth century (albeit in much diluted form when one thinks about what lay ahead). See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). See also, Noah W. Sobe, “Attention and Spectatorship: Educational Exhibits at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco 1915”, in *Innovation and Education at Universal Exhibitions, 1851–2010*, ed. Volker Barth, 95–116 (Paris: International Bureau of Expositions, 2007).

Additional research reveals that the Inuit traveller that Maria Edgeworth quoted was one of six who had been brought to London in 1773 by George Cartwright (1739/40?–1824). Cartwright was a former British naval officer who spent about 16 years serving in various positions in Newfoundland and Labrador between 1766 and the late 1780s. The 1792 publication of Cartwright's journals in three volumes provided first-hand accounts of Inuit ways of life, as Cartwright had, for periods, lived in several Native American settlements and travelled with Native groups. It is from this publication that Maria Edgeworth drew the words of Attuiock, though the full statement has Attuiock saying: "Oh! I am tired; here are too many houses; too much smoke; too many people; Labrador is very good; seals are plentiful there; I wish I was back again."³⁸ (Edgeworth transformed Cartwright's rendition of Attuiock's plea into: "too much smoke – too much noise – too much houses – too much men – too much everything!") The Inuits' stay in London had included a good number of cross-cultural misperceptions (on both sides). Particularly telling, however, was Cartwright's surprise – as the delegation initially sailed up the Thames through London – that Attuiock and others made no mention of the bridges they passed under. When Cartwright directed attention to what he took as impressive engineering marvels, the Inuit announced that they had simply assumed that the bridges were naturally occurring stone structures.³⁹ Sadly, this story has a tragic ending; Attuiock and all but one of the other visitors died of smallpox on the return journey. Nonetheless, in his appraisal of the visit Cartwright asserted that his guests did come to comprehend some of the things they were seeing, though he added that "the greater part of these were as totally lost upon them, as they would have been upon one of the brute creation".⁴⁰

Producing the attentive child in the eighteenth century brought concentration and civilisation into contact with one another. At the same time, as Rousseau's *Emile* shows, notions of attentiveness allowed for gender differentiation and the exclusion of girls from instruction that was designed to produce autonomy and freedom. And, as John Locke's writings show, ideas about attention, particularly when linked to notions of pain and pleasure, could help to produce very different forms of educational practice (and objectives) for the poor, as compared to the sons of gentlemen. This article has also argued that in Locke, Rousseau, and Edgeworth we can also see the makings of a trajectory where attention moves from being something the teacher uses to achieve instructional purposes to also being a quality of self-possession and an integral accessory to the reasoning mind, and, thus, is one of the chief ends of education.

The educational theorists discussed in this article approached human attentiveness with a degree of confidence and certainty that may have been unique to the eighteenth century and unbridled Enlightenment faith in humanity. Properly keeping and fixing the child's attention did provoke a score of anxieties for Locke, Rousseau, and Edgeworth. Nonetheless, human attentiveness, when approached with the proper pedagogical tactics, was seen to provide the educator with a reliable object that could be used to construct self-governing subjects and socially productive citizens. By the

³⁸George Cartwright, *A Journal of Transactions and Events during a Residence of nearly Sixteen Years on the Coast of Labrador*. 3 vols., vol. 1 (Newark: Allin & Ridge, 1792), 268.

³⁹"They were greatly astonished at the number of shipping which they saw in the river; for they did not suppose that there were so many in the whole world: but I was exceedingly disappointed to observe them pass through London Bridge without taking much notice of it. I soon discovered that they took it for a natural rock which extended across the river." *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 268.

end of the nineteenth century, the instrumentation and manipulations of psychologists (and eventually advertisers as well) made human attentiveness seem considerably more fragile.⁴¹ Yet, as a pedagogical object/target, the child's attention has long continued to generate categories and qualities that sort people into different kinds, and, accordingly, as suited for some forms of schooling and not others.

Notes on contributor

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⁴¹In addition to Crary, on attention circa 1900 see Hagner, "Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science," 686.