Montaigne

Montaigne, a man of great intellect who's philosophies about life placed him ahead of his time. He lived during the Renaissance and questioned many of the events that were taking place. The religious wars and the re-occurrence of the plague sent him into a deep reflection of life. He also questioned the education of children and explained in depth why his ideas were more beneficial. These ideas are revolutionary for his time and in many ways for ours.

I was introduced to Montaigne while taking a French literature class. The instructor assigned Selections from the Essays of Montaigne and warned us that he was very difficult to understand. This was true at first until I began to read his essay on "The Education of Children"; it seemed as if I was reading an article from a modern psychology journal. His ideas on education were very similar to my own and I began to greatly admire his work.

Children of the Renaissance were treated very harshly by their tutors during instruction. He felt that this was very wrong and that the instructors should "lighten up" on their students. This way of teaching would not allow for love of education and without the love the student would not learn. He also believed that children needed to learn through experience not memorization. I feel that the most important concept that Montaigne stresses is act of listening to your student. By listening to the student the instructor can also learn.
Montaigne's views on education have played out in my life. I worked as an instructional aide for many years and have seen first hand the implications of harsh treatment (not physical) to students. Several of the teachers that I had worked with did not listen to their students and expected them to perform at a level that they had not yet reached. I have also seen students who were reaching out and only needed someone to hear them. To me listening to a student is not difficult but to many feel it is a waste of time. One reason why I admire Montaigne is the fact that he felt that listening to students and not ridiculing them was very important and wrote about it for everyone to read. He took a risk by voicing his opinions because they were very different from the practices of the time.

Many people in our society today ridicule others for listening to students. I experienced this when a middle school student acted up in class frequently and the teacher could not change her behavior. The student seemed to be having a hard time with her assignments and I talked to the teacher about giving her a little extra help. His response was that "she was just being a brat," nothing would straighten her out, and he did not feel my help was necessary. Finally, he was fed up with her disruptions and told me to get her out of his class. On the way to the office the girl was in tears; she explained to me her fear of negative numbers and her problems at home. (She did not receive any help from her parents.) She did not understand how the number line worked and asked for help. I could not help her class because she was not classified as a student who needed it. I suggested meeting after school in the library after school and she agreed.
It only took a few days and she learned how to add and subtract negative numbers. Listening to the student and a little extra time solved her behavior problem in class, not the harsh words and threats of punishment. It is sad to say, but after the student’s improvement I was no longer spoken to by the teacher.

That was only one example of how Montaigne’s theories hold true even today and how we still as a society need to change our ways. I had many more experiences of students being ridiculed, told they are dumb or just lazy. That is not the way to instill the love of education in children; it only pushes them further away. Many of the students that were ridiculed learn to dismiss their education because one person told them they were stupid. Teachers do not understand the impact they can have on their students; it takes only one negative remark to set a student back many years. Teachers that follow will have a hard time getting the student to become self confident no matter how hard they try. I have learned a great deal from these experiences and hope that as a teacher I will be able to instill a love for education in my students.

Research has been done that shows that children and even adults respond better to kind treatment than to harsh. This does not mean that children or even adults do not need to be corrected but that there are better ways of going about it. Listening to students and showing them that you care about them and education can only be beneficial. If someone feels that this task is too difficult, they have no place in education. Montaigne knew this four hundred years ago. why can’t people understand it today?