

## **Bronson Alcott's Educational Reforms**

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In a time when educational reforms are constantly in news coverage and legislation, the focus of the change is on reaching equality and consistency in school systems across the United States and within each individual school system. With all these reforms to better the educational standards we set for our teachers and students, it is clear which subjects are considered to be less important in the United States: arts and physical and natural education. The developing trend seems to be that in order to provide sufficient time to teach the math and writing skills that are examined during standardized testing, subjects such as art and music have been cut, deemed less useful in a child's education. The loss of art, music, drama, and physical education programs in the United States school system is a heartbreaking misfortune for our culture and our children.

In order for the newly formed United States to be able to distinguish itself, it needed to focus on its culture, and its savior was a group of intellectuals who would later be part of the Transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism formed partly as a protest against the lingering Calvinism in New England, and partly out of the simple desire

to create art. The artists and writers began developing art, literature, and philosophies which were unique to the States and which helped form the distinction between American and British culture. Children were seen as successors to continue the culture for the years to come, so childhood education and development were very important. There were numerous advances in the state of American education during this time. Even though many Americans still believed only white males should be educated, it was very common amongst the Transcendentalists to believe that the young girls as well as the children of color in the community should receive the same education as the white male children did.

A prominent intellectual among the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists, Amos Bronson Alcott very much believed in equal education. "Though he was largely self-taught, he went on to become one of America's most influential educational reformers" (Hampson). He had many ideas that were radical at the time about the best ways to educate young children, such as employing conversation-based learning, developing skills in the arts, and encouraging nature education. These and many of his other ideas are now practiced in today's school systems.

Bronson Alcott attempted to open a few different schools, but they each had little success, and often would only remain open for a year or two. After several quick failures, he opened the Temple School in Boston

in 1834, which lasted longer than the other schools did, but was also closed in 1839. At first, the criticisms of his schools were based on the teaching strategies Alcott implemented; later, much of the controversy surrounding Bronson's schools was because he accepted girls and children of color into his classrooms. To educate the white female children was a radical idea itself, and educating a young black girl was outrageous. Alcott believed that all children should receive equal educations, an idea which was simply unheard of at the time. Alcott was one of the first known educators in the United States to racially integrate his classes.

His teaching strategies also caused problems because he believed his students should feel comfortable having discussions with their teachers, rather than simply listening to them lecture for hours. The practice of conversing was, to Bronson Alcott, the foundation of true knowledge and the ability to be educated. He believed that knowledge came from within and needed to be discovered by the child's teachers.

During the time of the Temple School's operation, Alcott published his famous work, *Conversations With Children on the Gospels*. Talking with children about morals, Jesus, and other subjects that were usually untouched by educators caused Alcott to receive more ridicule. Despite the complaints, Alcott continued with his conversational teaching

strategies and, consequently, more parents pulled their students out of his school. Still, his practices remained true to his beliefs because he maintained that when the children had conversations with their instructors, they began to think for themselves and learned to look deeper into issues, as well as into their own intelligence instead of always an adult's, and develop opinions and thoughts of their own. The conversations made the children feel they were closer to the level of their teachers and, therefore, helped encourage their individual thought and understanding in a variety of subjects.

Another important aspect in Bronson's educational ideals was concentrating on topics or subjects the children showed interest in. In many ways, Alcott's theories and practices were similar to those advocated in Montessori schools, which encourage children to explore their own interests. For Bronson Alcott, no topic was a poor area of interest, because he believed there to be a reason for the child's desire to concentrate on the area. "Alcott felt that the basic impulses in the human being were noble ones and that education should consist in freeing the child from restrictions and giving full rein to his imagination," rather than forcing him or her to study a subject in which he or she had no interest, or to ignore a subject that fascinated them ("Amos Bronson Alcott"). If a child really enjoyed discussing the

foundations of government, for example, Bronson would allow the child to study the governments of any nation as in-depth as he or she wished. If, however, a young girl had a strong desire to become an author, he would have her focus on her writing abilities and would allow her to imagine storylines and develop them. This was a system he felt strongly about because he believed every child had knowledge and abilities that needed to be discovered - and each child's knowledge and ability was unique to that child.

Bronson's ideal educational system also concentrated on environmental, or natural, education. The children might explore the landscape and learn about the ecology around them, or they might simply run around and play games. "Education should encourage the child mentally, morally, spiritually, esthetically, and physically. For Alcott the body was as important as the mind, so he introduced into his classes such innovations as organized play and gymnastics" ("Amos Bronson Alcott"). Physical education had yet to be implemented in American schools, and it, like every other idea Bronson Alcott had, seemed crazy to many people because it wasted classroom time. Bronson believed that children should have an equal amount of time to explore and exercise outdoors in order to complement their academic studies.

Aside from the benefits of exercise, if children learned more about

the natural world and its processes, they would be more aware of the world and be more environmentally conscious. The children would begin to recognize the size of the world and the possibilities that they had later in life. The understanding the students would gain, therefore, would connect to the knowledge they gained in the classroom, and the students would be more able to grasp how they fit into the world around them.

Journal writing was also something Bronson always stressed in the education of his students because he felt it strengthened critical thinking skills, increased memory, and provoked imagination. At the time, a journal was more likely to be used for composing essays and brainstorming than for recording one's daily events. The Alcott daughters -- Anna, Louisa, Elizabeth, and May -- all kept daily journals at the request of their father.

Daily journal-keeping formed a significant part of the home curriculum. Louisa and her sisters wrote a weekly newspaper in which they recorded family events and published their literary and artistic endeavors. The girls and their neighbors formed a dramatic society, and the Hillside House barn became the local theater where they performed Louisa's melodramatic plays. ("Daughter of the Transcendentalists")

Often at night, the girls would read their journal entries aloud to

encourage sharing and public-speaking skills. Bronson Alcott also kept a journal for his writings his entire adult life, many entries which have since been published.

Bronson, a self-educated man for the most part, home-schooled his four daughters. “Bronson remained the primary teacher of his children; encouraging self expression, a love of Nature, helping others, tempering independence with self control and finding one's own niche in life” (Branch). Alcott personally educated his four daughters on every subject from classic languages to philosophy to music. To supplement the education they received indoors, the four girls spent a lot of time outside of the home, sometimes studying nature at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, with Henry David Thoreau, another writer in the Transcendental period.

The Alcott daughters each developed a distinct personality as they grew up. Anna was very talented at acting, and Elizabeth was the musician of the family. May Alcott always enjoyed studying and creating visual art, and would later give Daniel Chester French -- the famous sculptor who produced the Lincoln Memorial and other famous works -- his first art lesson in her art school. The most well known Alcott was Louisa May, who wrote *Little Women*. Writing was certainly the skill Bronson encouraged her to pursue, both because it was her passion and

because she had such an aptitude for it, and that was the case for her three sisters and their crafts as well. Whatever the girls wanted to study or work towards later in life, their father had nothing but encouragement to give them. Without their unconventional father, the Alcott sisters likely would not have been educated simply because they were girls and, if they had been lucky enough to go to school, their creative abilities might have gone unnoticed or been suppressed.

If it were not for art, music, and literature, no country or group of people would have an easily traceable culture. The culture in the United States began with the creation of new art and new ideas and was advanced by the brilliant minds of the Transcendentalists -- Amos Bronson Alcott among them. The creative minds that continue developing new art forms and new ideas in already existing forms are the people to whom the American culture owes thanks.

During the overhaul of the United States school system, trends to erase creative and environmental education should be reversed. Schools should instead develop the art and physical education programs to provide a more diverse foundation for students. Art education should not be removed from school systems based on the belief that it will not be useful to children once they leave organized education. Art and music in public schools provide creative outlets to children who might otherwise

never discover their own creativity. The ability to create art and music might not always be on the path to making millions of dollars in one's adult life, but the process is one that nurtures and stimulates the human ability to engage in complex, imaginative thought. In short, such disciplines make us more human.

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