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## An Appreciation of Amos Bronson Alcott as a Teacher

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AN APPRECIATION  
OF  
AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT AS A TEACHER

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A Thesis  
Presented in Candidacy for the  
Degree of Master of Arts

by  
Myrtle Edith Pedersen  
//

Grand Forks  
University of North Dakota

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This thesis presented by Myrtle Edith Pedersen as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of North Dakota, is hereby approved by the committee under which she has carried on her work.

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## PREFACE

The general opinion seems to be that A. Bronson Alcott "bids fair to be remembered only for the influence which he had upon greater men," especially such literary men as Emerson and Thoreau. Students of American literature can not afford to overlook the fact that his influence was perhaps equally as great in the educational field. Henry Barnard, editor of the American Journal of Education, recognized him as an advanced educator, "ardently engaged in the work of school improvement." An article in the Dictionary of American Biography definitely states that he was an able teacher but that his methods were too progressive to be permissible.

The purpose of this thesis is to present a limited appreciation of Alcott's improved and progressive principles and practices, as revealed through a study of excerpts from his letters and diaries as quoted by Sanborn and Harris, the Record of a School, and his Conversations. It does not consider his more familiar adverse practices.

In order to understand and appreciate Alcott's work as an educator, I made a background study of his teaching experiences. Then I made a more detailed study of his actual teaching, comparing his principles and methods with those used in the typical schools of his day. The results of these studies are summarized in the thesis.



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## CHAPTER I

### A. BRONSON ALCOTT'S EXPERIENCES AS A TEACHER

At the beginning of the nineteenth century and even for forty years later, it was customary for the educated young men from New England to begin their life work by teaching or by serving as private tutors in one of the southern states. Consequently, Bronson Alcott, at the age of nineteen, left Connecticut for a period of apprenticeship in Virginia and the Carolinas. This was in 1818. His uncle, Dr. Tillotson Bronson, under whom he had had part of his early training, had given him a certificate which would qualify him to teach. Full of high hopes, but with no experience and with a youthful aspect that gave no indication of his rare ability as a disciplinarian, the young would-be-pedagogue went in search of a school. It seemed as though fate had turned against him; he tramped the roads of Virginia in vain. As he said himself, "It was plain that these people, . . . , ignorant as they were, had sense enough not to engage a strolling schoolmaster, come all the way from Yankeeland, to instruct their children."<sup>1</sup> Convinced of the futility of his search, he decided to go to Norfolk. There was little else for him to do but to take up the traditional Connecticut business of peddling. The time he spent in this life of travel, trade, and vicissitude corresponded almost exactly with that required for a college education. In the estimation of Sanborn, these experiences were far more valuable to him than any four years at Yale College could ever have been. At any rate, his frustrated hopes and dreams were an excellent preparation for the opposition which he was to meet later in life when he should begin to revolutionize the methods employed in common school teaching.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Alcott's diary, F. B. Sanborn and Wm. T. Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 36.

No amount of discouragement had been able to kill his early interest in elementary education. It was, therefore, an occasion of great joy to him when his cousin William Alcott<sup>2</sup> secured a teaching position for him in the Fall Mountain District of Bristol. His first experiences in teaching were all of short duration - four months at Bristol, during the winter of 1823-1824; a brief period at Wolcott, in the autumn of 1824; and four months in West Street, Bristol. These preliminary schools were important because they gave Alcott an opportunity to test some of the methods and suggest some of the changes which he afterwards carried out in Cheshire.

Alcott was soon to realize what it meant to be an enlightened educator. When he began his teaching career, the common schools of Connecticut had degenerated into neglected schools for the poor. Not long before, they had been considered "an example for other states and the Admiration of the Union,"<sup>3</sup> but a marked decline had occurred. Most of the enlightened educators in the state attributed this backward step chiefly to the "princely school fund"<sup>4</sup> that had been established in 1799. One would have expected unusual progress as a result of a legislative bounty of fifty thousand dollars a year which "would soon afford ninety or one hundred thousand a year,"<sup>5</sup> but the reverse proved true. Most unfortunately, the State made the fatal mistake of granting the money unconditionally, instead of requiring the districts to match the money proceeding from the fund with money raised by taxation. Thus, by lightening the burden of the taxpayer, the fund really served

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>A legislative document of Kentucky (1822), quoted by Barnard, "History of Common Schools in Connecticut," American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 137, June, 1858.

<sup>4</sup>Mr. Humphrey quoted, Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>5</sup>Mr. Peers quoted, Ibid., p. 136.



to lessen interest in the common schools. As a result, an alarming indifference with regard to standards prevailed. The act did not stipulate the length of the school term, so the schools were kept open just long enough to use up the public money and then closed. No attempt was made to improve the system. There were "no visible effects except in diminishing taxation."<sup>6</sup> It was no wonder that the primary schools of Connecticut could no longer maintain their acknowledged preeminence over similar schools in other states, for they had failed to keep pace even with the progress of general improvement in their own state.<sup>7</sup> The standards of free education had declined so much that all those who could help themselves would not accept it, even as a gratuity.<sup>8</sup> Rather than starve the intellects and impoverish the hearts of their children, they were willing to make large sacrifices in order to send them to private schools which were now being established in great numbers in every town and society. This encouraged class division and hastened the decline of the public school. The interest of the higher classes and their directive intelligence were an aid to the private school, whereas they should have assisted in raising the standards of the free school.

Alcott began as a public school teacher in the Center District schoolhouse at Cheshire, November 1825. He very soon found out that any measures to elevate or improve the system of common schools would be strenuously opposed.<sup>9</sup> Public sentiment in the neighborhood was strongly in favor of the decadent popular system. Even among the learned there was a "sort of contempt for the common schools, which found expression in such utterances as the following, quoted by Alcott without mentioning the author's name, in

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<sup>6</sup>Idem.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>9</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 92.

his diary for 1826:

Professor X says: "We find no advantage in pursuing a different course of instruction from what has hitherto been practised. The world talks about improvements in instruction, - about the monitorial plan, about scholars teaching each other, and a thousand new fangled notions; they are good for nothing, - I would not give a straw for all of them. Such puffing and blowing about them is disgusting. The public prints are full of trash which is palmed off upon the people. The money appropriated for common schools ought to be applied to better purposes, -."<sup>10</sup>

Alcott realized the deplorable state of common school education but had faith in the possibility of raising the standards. Having spent his childhood only a few miles from Cheshire, he was quite well acquainted with the community. Therefore, he advanced cautiously with his reforms. "With some few improvements, the old plan of instruction was adhered to at the beginning."<sup>11</sup> He attempted little more than to introduce a few additional branches of study, adapt the character of instruction to the young mind, and modify habits of thought, feeling, and action by mild and conciliatory measures.<sup>12</sup> As long as he had not advocated any radical innovations, either in measure or in sentiment, or demanded any pecuniary assistance, he had the unanimous approval of the parents.<sup>13</sup> They could not quite understand his constant, uniform kindness; but, since the children responded favorably to the new method of treatment, they could not very well object. The time came, however, when Alcott felt some more definite changes were necessary. The second term was characterized by many such improvements which were paid for out of his own salary. The third term was different. Alcott required more salary than twenty-seven dollars a month, alterations in the schoolroom, new classbooks, and additions to the school library.<sup>14</sup> He had thought that the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>Idem.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted from Alcott's diary, Ibid., p. 94.



public was sufficiently liberalized and would grant his requests; but he was wrong in his judgment. The people were willing to give him the salary and part of the alterations, but that was all. Then Alcott acted independently, purchasing the classbooks and library books himself. Naturally this "gave offence and opposition commenced."<sup>15</sup> The fourth and last term at Cheshire was begun in a less hopeful mood. Time and again the village was on the verge of a turmoil. As a result the teaching became more difficult.

If it had not been for the encouragement of other progressive educators, probably Alcott would have been unable to bear up under the strain. On May 3, in recognition of his work at Cheshire, as reported by William Alcott, he was elected to membership in the recently formed Society for the Improvement of Common Schools, "one of the earliest, if not the first society of the kind established to advance the department of popular education in this country."<sup>16</sup> So marked had his success been in the eyes of those persons in Connecticut who knew what a good school was, that they began to praise his work. The Boston Recorder of May 14, 1827, made what was perhaps the first statement to appear in print concerning the Cheshire school:

"There is one school of a superior or improved kind, viz., Mr. A. B. Alcott's school in Cheshire, - the best common school in this State, perhaps in the United States."<sup>17</sup>

About this same time, William Alcott wrote a letter to Samuel May of Brooklyn, Connecticut to give him "some account of a remarkable school, kept on a very original plan, in the adjoining town of Cheshire, by his kinsman, Mr. A. B. Alcott."<sup>18</sup> His account so excited May's curiosity "to know more

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<sup>15</sup>Idem.

<sup>16</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, pp. 75-76.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted from Mr. May's autobiography, Ibid., p. 86.

of the American Pestalozzi, as he has since been called,"<sup>19</sup> that he wrote immediately to him for a more detailed explanation of the original experiment. He desired a complete discussion of his principles and methods of training children. The answer he received convinced him that Alcott was a genius. He marvelled at his "depth of insight in the nature of man," his "true sympathy with children," and his "profound appreciation of the work of education."<sup>20</sup> In his next communication, May urged him to come to Brooklyn.

There can be no doubt but that the improvements made at Cheshire were far in advance of the practice in most of the common schools of this period.

"Indeed, it may be doubted if there was any school supported by taxation in New England at that time, which had carried so far the measures since recognized everywhere as essential to the highest success in dealing with the instruction of children, and especially the youngest. The spirit of the kindergarten was manifested in Mr. Alcott's system, although the name was still unknown in America. And the genius of Pestalozzi, which had accomplished so much in Switzerland, seemed to be reembodyed in this Connecticut Schoolmaster. . ."<sup>21</sup>

It seemed, however, that as Alcott's school became known in an ever-widening circle, criticism on the part of his opponents became more direct and bitter. Without the knowledge of either Alcott or the majority of the district,<sup>22</sup> those opposed to his measures, and more especially to his salary were plotting to thwart and, if possible destroy, Alcott's possibility of remaining in their village. They had made preparations for the opening of another school, on May 21, in competition with his, having hired a Miss Hotchkiss as instructor.<sup>23</sup> He was at a loss to know just what to do to

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<sup>19</sup>Idem.

<sup>20</sup>Idem.

<sup>21</sup>Idem.

<sup>22</sup>Alcott's diary quoted by Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott,

Vol. 1, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

appease them. He already had made concessions and agreed to a salary reduction of seven dollars per month but that had failed to harmonize the district.<sup>24</sup> What more was there to do? He saw no possibility of influencing the "narrow and limited" public sentiment that existed in regard to education, for the people would not read and thereby be convinced of the practicability of his doctrines.<sup>25</sup> What they demanded was nothing less than a thoroughly tested system such as had been in use for approximately fifty years. As Alcott once said, "- the fear of innovation hangs like an incubus upon every measure of improvement."<sup>26</sup> Fearing that the order, harmony, and friendly feeling which had pervaded the children would be much impaired, he decided it would be better, both for himself and the children, to leave and in that way restore harmony. In his diary for May 17, he said:

"I am the centre of all this commotion of feeling; were I out of the way, it might subside. And although a few might for a time be unwilling to unite with the others, ultimately harmony would be restored. I am unable to make more sacrifices; I cannot always contend against avarice and ingratitude. To remain here with the little hope which is before us, seems to be wasting time, efforts, and feelings."<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, he was convinced that the public mind had been sufficiently awakened to make something grow out of his past efforts. By May 21, he had resolved to close the school.

He left for Wolcott the latter part of June. During this enforced vacation, he had much time to think. Were his efforts worth the trouble? He

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 89-90. Salaries ranged from five dollars to twenty dollars a month. The average compensation, in addition to board, was about eleven dollars a month for male teachers and a dollar a week for females. Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 91.



believed they were. Service, not popularity, should be the aim of life. The years at Cheshire, although they had ended apparently in failure, had strengthened his faith in the principles and modes of rational instruction that he had put into practice there. He was not ready to give up teaching; he had merely begun. Writing from Wolcott, July 2, 1827, he said, "I have . . . a desire to turn my efforts into this channel of good to my fellowmen."<sup>28</sup>

With this end in view, he began visiting various schools and friends of education. In August he drove to Brooklyn to pay his first visit to Samuel May, and incidentally became acquainted with his future wife.<sup>29</sup> Alcott must have impressed May deeply for he made the following remark in his autobiography, "I have never but in one instance, been so immediately taken possession of by any man I have ever met in my life."<sup>30</sup> Alcott had found another friend who was to be of great importance to him in his later life.

During the fall and winter of 1827-1828, Alcott taught a district school on West Street in Bristol. He soon found that the greatest obstacle to his success was the close proximity of Cheshire to Bristol. Evidently not content with having destroyed Alcott's influence in Cheshire, these former enemies came over and circulated unfavorable reports about him. Although the children were happy and interested in their work, he was being assailed on all sides by strong prejudice. There were only two or three adults with whom he could feel free to converse, and even they were unprepared to receive his views without much explanation.<sup>31</sup> Since he was aware from the

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-102.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>31</sup>Quoted from Alcott's diary, Ibid., p. 107.

start that his opinions, if "fully developed, would alarm the people," he decided to follow a "course of prudent compromise."<sup>32</sup> Still, cautious as he was, he could not forestall the inevitable. In the January 14 entry of his diary, he mentioned that there were those who already were determined that he should not succeed. Ten days later, he added, ". . . I know not how long a gainsaying world will permit me to pursue the familiar, affectionate manner in which I have recently treated the scholars. Already it has become a subject of discussion among their parents, - they know not what to think of treating children in so kind a manner."<sup>33</sup> It was not long, for about a week later another school had been opened. "Those dissatisfied with our plans have engaged an instructor and commenced another school this day, with fifteen scholars. Our number continues the same, - forty-five, - and unless something occurs to kindle the fire of opposition, this number will remain till the close of the term."<sup>34</sup> However, something did occur. Alcott was attacked from a new angle. As he said, "My moral opinions are subjects of discussion among those who are bound to the faith of antiquity, and determined to support it at all events."<sup>35</sup> He sensed very keenly the growing estrangement. On March 28, he "closed the school with regret."<sup>36</sup> When he did this, he not only quit his public school teaching but also exiled himself from his native state. His experiences at Cheshire and at Bristol had demonstrated to him that Connecticut was not the place to try to introduce progressive methods in common school education. He would go where the spirit

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<sup>32</sup>Idem.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>34</sup>Idem.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted from Alcott's diary, Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>36</sup>Idem.



was more receptive to him. Henceforth, with the exception of a short stay in Pennsylvania, he did the rest of his teaching in Massachusetts where public sentiment was more favorable to educational reforms.

After his failure at Bristol, Alcott again found his way to Brooklyn. He had no definite plans for the future, so he was ready to consider any recommendations offered. Acting upon the suggestion of the Mays that he open an infant school in Boston, he made his first trip to that city. There he met William Russell, editor of the American Journal of Education,<sup>37</sup> the first educational periodical in the English language.<sup>38</sup> Besides conferring with a number of the leading educational men of Boston in reference to the establishment of an infant school, he also visited some ladies who were planning a similar school of charity.<sup>39</sup> When the ladies requested him to take charge of their project on Salem Street for three months, Alcott willingly accepted the offer. He would get the charity school in proper running order and then open an infant school of his own in a more central part of the city. His would be for the children of the more intelligent and wealthy families.

Before the charity school opened, Alcott set out for New York and Philadelphia where he examined schools and talked with educators.<sup>40</sup> On his return trip to Boston, he stopped off at Wolcott and spent a few days with William Alcott.

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<sup>37</sup>The leading objects of this periodical were to furnish a record of facts regarding the past and present state of education in the United States and foreign countries; to aid in diffusing enlarged and liberal ideas of education; to forward the education of the female sex; but chiefly to promote elementary education. The Journal was succeeded by The American Annals of Education and Instruction, edited by William C. Woodbridge.

<sup>38</sup>Projected in 1825 but not started at Boston until 1826, Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 129, June 1858.

<sup>39</sup>Alcott's diary quoted by Sanborn and Harris, A Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup>Idem.

By October 17 he had completed his work at Salem Street; three days later he started his own private school on Common Street. For the first time, Alcott felt confident that he would have an opportunity to develop the true results of his methods, for the parents seemed "sincerely interested in his plan of rational education. . ."<sup>41</sup> By the end of January, the school had increased from ten to twenty, each boy paying a tuition of eight dollars a quarter. Financially, Alcott was in a better position now than he had ever been. In February he formed a plan for co-education<sup>42</sup> and made arrangements to remove the school to more favorable quarters on Tremont Street. The removal was accomplished in April, but the plan for admitting girls was postponed.

The school continued to prosper until December 1830 when Alcott took his bride of nine months, Abba May, the sister of Samuel, to Philadelphia. There he had been invited under auspicious conditions to open a school among the Quakers at Germantown. When he started the school, he had five pupils; by the end of June he had ten, all between the ages of three and nine. The school, which had been started in his own little home, was soon moved to a larger building supplied by Rueben Haines, Alcott's chief promoter. Shortly his school was consolidated with an older school conducted by William Russell. "The plan was that Mr. Alcott should teach children up to nine years old, and should then pass them over to Mr. Russell, whose schoolroom was in a different building; they hoped to increase the school to thirty or forty pupils, . . . and upon these to illustrate their principles of education."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

Alcott and Russell took charge of the girls and of the elementary department, while Jenks and Cole taught the older boys.

Later in the year, Russell and Alcott engaged in an enterprise to enlist public cooperation in the spreading of their advanced educational views. The result was the Philadelphia Association of Teachers. Lectures were promoted and a journal<sup>44</sup> established to promulgate their opinions. Besides his teaching, Alcott "contributed to the New England journals of education and he occasionally lectured to audiences, larger or smaller on some branch of his main subject, - the development by instruction and conversation of the youthful mind."<sup>45</sup> Late in November he began to feel restless. He was anxious to return to Boston, whose schools were now the "acknowledged models of the Union."<sup>46</sup> Here he could carry out his own system of education as it had evolved during his nine years as a schoolmaster.

After a brief experiment in another Philadelphia school, Alcott returned to Boston where, in the autumn of 1834, he opened his famous school in the Masonic Temple on Tremont Street. Here he finally launched his scheme of co-education, believing that such an arrangement was most favorable to the exertion of a pure moral influence on the formation of character and to the preservation of the social relations unbroken during the impressionable period of life. Of the thirty-four pupils, ranging between the ages of three and twelve, eight were girls. Elizabeth Peabody, who thirty years

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<sup>44</sup>This was the Journal of Instruction, published from January 1, 1832 until March 15 of the same year. It was published monthly by H. H. Porter of Philadelphia whose failing in a few months brought the undertaking to naught. The editors were: W. Russell, A. B. Alcott, W.R. Johnson, J. K. Keagy, M. M. Carll, J. Frost, and S. C. Walker.

<sup>45</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 172.

<sup>46</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 137.



later gave an impelling momentum to the kindergarten movement in America, offered her services and Alcott gladly accepted her assistance. The pupils continued to increase both in numbers and in interest; Elizabeth Peabody was delighted and enthusiastic.

Believing that the facts which transpired in the classroom were worthy of being presented to the world,<sup>47</sup> she began, on December 29, 1834, to keep a record of the school activities and recommended its future publication. Alcott knew that the public was not ready to receive "an elaborate work on the philosophy and practice of education," but he thought they might be reached through "such a simple record" of classroom proceedings. In his diary for January, 1835, he wrote:

Miss Peabody is now present every day, and keeps a journal of the operations and spirit of the instruction. It bids fair to prove a faithful transcript of what passes in the schoolroom. The journal is to be published, not only as a prospectus of my present school, but as an offering to the community of the fruits of my mind in a most important relation; for I do not wish to come forward with an elaborate work on the philosophy and practice of education. The time has not yet come. Principles and methods, what is theoretic and what is practical, should be united at present in whatever is thrown out to the inquisitive public. A simple record of practice in the schoolroom, with just enough explanation to make it intelligible, to impart the spirit of the theory, will be more effective in impressing my views than a more elaborate work. I shall venture the volume in the spring, by way of trial.<sup>48</sup>

The Record of a School was completed in June and was off the press by the middle of July. When Russell, who was still in Philadelphia, received his volume, he wrote an enthusiastic letter to his friend, expressing the following sentiment, "I am truly glad that such a work has come out. I do not know how much good it may do, but it is the most eloquent testimony for

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<sup>47</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, Preface, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, pp. 185-186.

humanity that I have ever heard."<sup>49</sup> Alcott was elated. Under date of September 9, the diary says:

The Record has been favorably received, and bids fair to do its work of usefulness to parents and teachers. Several notices of it have appeared recently in the periodicals, all favorable to it, and a review is promised in the forthcoming number of the Christian Examiner and in the North American. More than half the edition is already disposed of, and the demand is greater than ever at present.<sup>50</sup>

A month later a fire destroyed the remaining copies. A new and improved edition followed; but, contrary to expectation, it was not as favorably received as the original edition had been. The Annals of Education, one of the more important journals of that time, printed an editorial which certainly did not stimulate sales. The following stricture was expressed:

We must say that while we rejoice to see a Record of a School from any quarter, while we wish to see many, and hope to see some called forth to meet the errors of this one, we regard it as a mingled mass of truth and error, of useful and useless and injurious principles and methods. It will be interesting to every thinking teacher, but dangerous to the unthinking. We esteem the author highly, and hope reflection and experience will lead him to correct his views.<sup>51</sup>

This certainly was an opposite opinion to that of Russell, quoted above, and that of Ralph Waldo Emerson who, in his journal for 1835, wrote of the "Very good remark" he saw in the "very good Record of a School."<sup>52</sup>

The next school year, Alcott continued to extend his instruction. Among his additions was a complete plan for a series of conversations on the New Testament. It was not his intention to impart a system of opinions or promulgate sentiments but rather to give young minds some spiritual

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>52</sup>Emerson's Journals, Vol. III, p. 511.



direction and to awaken thought, kindle feeling, and quicken duty.<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Peabody with the assistance of Sophia Peabody and Margaret Fuller took down the children's answers verbatim but, for lack of time, was required to paraphrase Alcott's questions and remarks. All those who heard the conversations and helped to put them down on paper, urged Alcott to publish them. Among these admirers was Emerson who praised the work in his journal:

Yesterday I went to Mr. Alcott's school and heard a conversation upon the Gospel of St. John. I thought the experiment of engaging young children upon questions of taste and truth successful. A few striking things were said by them. I felt strongly as I watched the gradual dawn of a thought upon the minds of all, that to truth is no age or season. It appears, or it does not appear, and when the child perceives it, he is no more a child; age, sex, are nothing; we are all alike before the great whole. Little Josiah Quincy, now six years old, is a child having something wonderful and divine in him. He is a youthful prophet.<sup>54</sup>

The publishing of the Conversations late in January, 1837, was the occasion of a fierce attack in the Boston newspapers the following March. The sales had been rapid at first; but, as a result of the scurrilous attacks of the newspapers, especially the Daily Advertiser and the Courier, this popularity was soon checked.<sup>55</sup> The second volume appeared on February 15 of the same year; the third volume never went to the press. Because of these dialogues, Alcott became the object of much unjust ridicule. Emerson, aroused to indignation, wrote a note to the publishers of both of the above mentioned papers. To the editor of the Courier he wrote:

. . . In behalf of this book, I have but one plea to make, - this namely, let it be read.

Mr. Alcott has given proof . . . of a strong mind and a pure heart. A practical teacher, he has dedicated for years his rare

<sup>53</sup>Record of Conversations on the Gospels held by Mr. Alcott's school; Unfolding the Doctrine and Discipline of Their Culture, Vol. 1, preface.

<sup>54</sup>Emerson's Journals, Vol. IV, p. 69, June 16, 1836.

<sup>55</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, pp. 214-215.

gifts to the science of education. These Conversations contain abundant evidence of extraordinary thought, either in the teacher, or the pupils, or in both. He aims to make children think. . .

Mr. Alcott's methods cannot be said to have had a fair trial. But he is making an experiment in which all the friends of education are interested. . . .<sup>56</sup>

The Courier printed the letter solely out of respect for Emerson and really did not help Alcott, for shortly afterwards they printed another article, a far from complimentary opinion of a distinguished professor of Harvard College who said that ". . . one-third of Mr. Alcott's book was absurd, one-third was blasphemous, and one-third obscene."<sup>57</sup> Deeply moved by this abusive treatment but unable to stop it, Emerson wrote a comforting letter to his friend. ". . . I hate," he said, "to have all the little dogs barking at you, for you have something better to do than to attend to them. . ."<sup>58</sup> Alcott did have something better, but he could not convince the public.

Had Alcott been satisfied with publishing only the first volume of his Conversations he might have been able to win confidence later. Unfortunately, before sending this second volume to the printers, he had read the record through with the children and permitted them to add any comment to the remarks they had made earlier in the year. These comprised the Appendix. Sophia Peabody, who five years later became the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne, had recorded in this appendix a few passages concerning birth. This part Elizabeth had thought objectionable, but Alcott had seen no harm in including it. The results, however, proved that Elizabeth had been right. While the children had been entranced with these religious dialectics, the parents were alarmed. Such antagonism arose that Alcott was

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 218-219.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>58</sup>Idem.

on the verge of being assaulted. About this date, April 13, he made the following entry in his diary:

This has been a week of few incidents, but of such sober reflection. An unusual degree of excitement has pervaded this metropolis regarding my book. I have been severely censured, I learn, even by friends to my enterprise and who respect my character, for the publication of this work. The plan was to make the assault at my Friday evening conversation. But no such outrage was effected, and the minds of the disaffected are now stilling into quietude. Such a state of feeling calls for serious reflection. I have, of course, been much excited in this way. What my future movements shall be, time must decide. At present, I see not my way. The only course which, as a man of honor and dignity, I can pursue, is to preserve unbroken silence upon this subject, inasmuch as I have committed no offence, nor stepped from the line of my duty. As yet I have said nothing. The public prints have raised a hue and cry; the uproar has raged; but it begins to spend itself, and will soon die away. Should some one see fit to speak in my defence, I will thank him for the generous deed. If none shall speak, then will I rest my appeal on the silent testimony of my life, and this shall refute the slander and correct the misapprehension.<sup>59</sup>

This lack of a fighting spirit was strongly criticized by Thomas Beer in his article entitled, "An Irritating Archangel."<sup>60</sup> Emerson, however, was prone to be more sympathetic. He spoke of Alcott as a "wise man, simple, superior to display, and drops the best things as quietly as the least. . ."<sup>61</sup>

In the spring of 1837, when Alcott resumed his teaching, the uproar had subsided; but he found that only ten pupils were intrusted to his care. For two years they struggled on together, with one or two changes of place. Finally the school had to be closed.

The immediate occasion of closing it then was the unwillingness of Mr. Alcott's patrons to have their children educated in the same room with a colored child, whom in 1838 he had admitted; and when the protesting parents found Mr. Alcott deter-

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 221-222.

<sup>60</sup>Bookman, Vol. LXVI, pp. 357-366.

<sup>61</sup>Emerson's Journals, Vol. III, p. 559, October 21, 1935.



mined not to dismiss this child, they withdrew their own children, leaving him with only five pupils, - his own three daughters, a child of Mr. William Russell, and young Miss Robinson, the cause of offence.<sup>62</sup>

Alcott's enthusiasm for the cause of abolition had led him to this step. Before the end of April, the costly furniture, school library, and other apparatus that had been used at the Temple school were sold at auction.

The immediate shock of disappointment broke Alcott's health. Emerson offered his home as a place of rest, but Mrs. Alcott had already sent him on a visit to her brother in Plymouth County. As soon as he regained his health, he tried once more to get back into the teaching field; but the doors were closed for him. Even the primary school near Emerson's home was denied him. "These extraordinary changes everywhere aroused doubts of the schoolmaster's fitness, which were increased by only too well founded suspicions of religious heresy. . ."<sup>63</sup> The views he had expressed, primarily in the Conversations, were highly offensive to the majority of his countrymen and "together with his radical educational views were sufficient to defeat his work."<sup>64</sup> Finally Emerson succeeded in persuading him to leave the profession.

Although this marked the end of Alcott's activities as an elementary school teacher, it did not terminate his interest in educational progress. On the invitation of James P. Greaves of London, the friend and fellow-laborer of Pestalozzi in Switzerland, Alcott went to England in 1842. Greaves died before his arrival, but Alcott was received cordially by his friends, who had given the name Alcott House to their school at Ham, near London. Before returning to America, he spent some months in getting acquainted with various classes of reformers.

<sup>62</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 227.

<sup>63</sup>Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. 1, p. 141.

<sup>64</sup>Idem.

In 1859 he was appointed Superintendent of Schools in Concord. The school reports that he gave are considered "models of sane educational thinking."<sup>65</sup> He recommended the introduction into the curriculum of the twelve schools under his supervision singing, calisthenics, and a study of physiology and advocated the introduction of dancing, hours of directed conversations, and a course of readings aloud.<sup>66</sup> In this service, in which he reflected his earlier, unpopular experiments, he gave eminent satisfaction to his patrons. At this time he also organized an informal parent-teacher's club which likewise proved acceptable.<sup>67</sup>

In 1879, at the age of eighty, he founded the Concord School of Philosophy<sup>68</sup> which included the following upon its faculty: A. B. Alcott, F. B. Sanborn, T. Davidson, and Wm. T. Harris. Alcott's direct service in connection with the school terminated in October of 1882 when he was stricken with paralysis from which he never recovered completely. Still he remained Dean of the school until his death which was also the death of the Concord School.

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<sup>65</sup>Idem.

<sup>66</sup>Idem.

<sup>67</sup>Idem.

<sup>68</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. II, p. 532.



## CHAPTER II

### ALCOTT'S METHODS OF INFLUENCING THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES OF PUPILS

Alcott's unpopularity as a teacher may be very easily understood when one compares him with the average teacher of his day. He felt the need of improvement in common school education and was willing to pay the price of carrying out his advanced views. Only after he was convinced of the futility of his efforts was he ready to give up the fight. The innovations he introduced may be discussed under two headings: Alcott's methods of influencing the learning activities of his pupils and his educational principles and methods of classroom teaching. This chapter will deal with the first of these groupings.

#### Proper Atmosphere

The furnishings and arrangement of Alcott's school was in sharp contrast with the typical schoolroom of his day, where, besides the desks and a rod or ferule, ". . . the books, writings, inkstands, rules and plummets, with the fire-shovel and a pair of tongs, were the principal furniture."<sup>1</sup> Alcott believed explicitly that "objects which meet the senses every day for years must of necessity mold the mind."<sup>2</sup> So, after he had secured a very fine room in the Temple, "he ornamented it, not with such furniture as only an upholsterer can appreciate, but with such forms as would address and cultivate the imagination and heart."<sup>3</sup> The day he began teaching at the Masonic Temple, September 22, 1834, he wrote in his diary:

I have . . . made arrangements to fit up the interior in a style corresponding to the exterior, and what is of more importance, in adaptation to those who are to assemble there for the formation of tastes and habits. I have spared no

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<sup>1</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Idem.

expense to surround the senses with appropriate emblems of intellectual and spiritual life. Paintings, busts, books, and not inelegant furniture have been deemed important. I wish to fill every form that addresses the senses with significance and life, so that whatever is seen, said, or done shall picture ideal beauty and perfection; thus placing the child in a scene of tranquil pose and spiritual loveliness.<sup>4</sup>

This "tranquil pose and spiritual loveliness" were not to be ignored. Unconsciously they would diffuse an influence favorable to thought and study and thereby be a great aid to both intellectual and moral discipline. Happiness and application would be natural consequences. The mind would be predisposed to repose and serenity; and the instruction harmonizing with the external influence would render the school a delightful place to the child.

To stimulate the child's interest in learning, Alcott placed on his desk a small figure of a child aspiring; on his assistant's table a figure of Atlas bending under the weight of the world; and on a bookcase, behind the assistant's chair, figures of a child reading and of a child drawing. As an aid to discipline, he added a fine cast of Silence with his finger pointing up as though he were saying, "Beware!" As further decoration he hung pictures and maps on the walls. Then, in different places about the room, he had the Head of Jesus in bas-relief and busts of other great personages such as Plato, Socrates, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Besides making the schoolroom beautiful, Alcott was also much concerned with making the children comfortable, for comfort was bound to make learning easier. Most teachers put little thought on this.

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<sup>4</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 178.

The small pupils are required to sit on benches without backs, and those who write, sit at desks quite too high. . . these evils are beginning to be remedied; desks which are much lower than formerly, and entirely separate from each other, are occasionally found. . . .<sup>5</sup>

In strange contrast to the rigid benches of the typical schools, Alcott's seats were separate, comfortable in design, and of varying sizes to suit the individual needs of the pupils. Instead of the usual benches, Alcott provided regular chairs with backs. "In many of the schoolhouses in the state - in rich and populous towns too - our little friends the children are compelled to sit on the small hard, sharp-edged top of stump-like seats, without any support for the arms, and even without any backs. Call you this backing your friends?"<sup>6</sup> In the interest of satisfactory school work, as well as health, Alcott believed in "backing" his young friends.

Then, in order to make the school work itself pleasant, Alcott took time off for organized play. He suggested to the students that, rather than push one another about in their play, they ought to play "something with a plan." They reacted favorably to his suggestion and voted "unanimously to introduce play games for exercise within doors. Several plays were named . . . and entered on the list of sports for the term."<sup>7</sup> The schoolroom at Cheshire was heated by a stove exactly in the middle of the room. It was around this central open space that Alcott began his "course of gymnastics, - probably the first ever used in a Connecticut school."<sup>8</sup> It is therefore no wonder, since it was so uncommon for teachers to supervise the play, that Alcott said in his diary:

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<sup>5</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup>Common School Journal, Vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 78.



I endeavored to conciliate the good will of the pupils by mingling in their amusements, and attempted to make the school-room with its exercises a place where they might delight to assemble. In so doing I succeeded beyond expectation, yet with some complaint on the part of parents.<sup>9</sup>

Although Alcott's contemporaries were not yet ready to accept such emphasis upon creating a suitable atmosphere for study, modern educators are in complete accord with him. They have come to recognize that there is a definite advantage in agreeable surroundings, both to the learning process and to the discipline problem.

#### Discipline

Perhaps none of Alcott's educational principles received so much harsh criticism from the general public of his day as did his views on discipline. Nevertheless, it was just here that he showed his keenest insight into the nature of childhood. To him each child was a sacred trust. It was therefore his duty and privilege to develop each personality through the understanding of his needs. One of these needs was proper deportment. Shortly after opening his Temple school, he wrote:

I now have thirty-four pupils. . . They are a fine assemblage of children. There are few or no positive vices to eradicate; frivolity, carelessness, inactivity of thought, and ill-directed desire are the main qualities to which my attention is to be turned. As to direct intellectual action, little can be expected immediately. I shall first remove obstructions to the mind. . . Intellectual results will follow the discipline of the sentiments. . .<sup>10</sup>

With this end in view, Alcott set about to remove these obstructions.

He had noticed that children were generally grateful for being prevented from doing wrong, so he tried to reduce temptation to a minimum. He chose that they should

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 93-94.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

. . . come into school in perfect silence, and take their lessons without a whisper to one another; and this is generally effected without his being obliged to send any one out. It is very important to the quietness of a school that the children should not begin to play in the morning. If all intercommunication is forbidden until they are fairly interested in their lessons, much trouble is prevented.<sup>11</sup>

While they were studying, they sat with their backs to the instructor. Since Alcott was convinced that children were guilty of thoughtless irregularity rather than intentional, he reminded them each day, before they turned in their seats for recitations, that it could be done without noise. "A perfect machine," he said "was one which made the least noise. Every wheel moved so as not to interfere with the other parts, in a perfect machine. When the machine of this school was perfect, every wheel, that is, every boy and girl, would move without jarring against any other."<sup>12</sup> They usually responded to his admonitions and quietly took their places in a semicircle around his desk, each chair at a little distance from the other so that they would not be tempted to touch one another.

During recitations, he required profound attention, emphasizing its cultivation as a moral duty. He "thinks that children are morally benefited by being obliged to exercise such constant self-control; and he presents to them this as a motive not less frequently than the convenience of others."<sup>13</sup> The children were asked to sit at ease in their comfortable chairs and be attentive to every word uttered. A whisper, a movement, or a wandering look would arrest his attention and he would wait however long, until order was restored. The superintendents were told that they should "write down any smiles that did not arise out of the subject of the lesson; for smiles

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<sup>11</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

indicate a state of mind, and, when something is in the mind which has no relation to the subject, it is out of place. Besides, several take up the smile, and attention is diverted. It is true that smiles may arise out of the subject, and then they were proper."<sup>14</sup> Alcott required from them a distinct effort of self-control by

. . . asking them the question, whether they will make a great effort; then he imagines and shows them how they will be tempted, and prepares them both for the temptation, and to overcome it. Without inviting this co-operation, he cannot be sure, that however interesting is his reading, any fixed attention will be given. With it, the listening becomes a moral exercise; for to govern one's self from the motive of desiring to obey and deserve instruction, is a moral action. Mr. Alcott, however, tries to aid their endeavors, by selecting an interesting story; and as he reads, he constantly asks questions to make them co-operate with him, . . . The result is active and profound attention.<sup>15</sup>

By trying to make everything as interesting as possible, he hoped to secure their voluntary attention. The unpublished journal of a ten year old boy shows Alcott's success in securing and maintaining attention:

I was not very attentive the first part of the conversation, as I got thinking about other things, such as percussion caps, etc., but the conversation soon interested me a great deal more than the percussion caps and other little things. . . and I soon became so interested in the conversation that I thought about nothing else.<sup>16</sup>

This confession agrees with the testimony of Elizabeth Peabody:

Those who commonly instruct children would be astonished to witness the degree of attention which Mr. Alcott succeeds in obtaining from his school constantly. Indeed the majority of adults might envy them. It is, generally speaking, complete, profound, and as continuous as any would wish the attention of children to be.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 268.



Alcott also "expressed approbation of their stillness, which he thought had been remarkable."<sup>18</sup> Thus by his interesting conversations and his insistence upon absolute attention, he succeeded in his efforts.

Alcott had substituted a familiar and affectionate manner of treatment for the customary distant and imperative one. As he said:

I found that the system which does not cultivate the affections is very imperfect, for no permanent results could be had otherwise. Once gain the affection of children, and they may be led at your inclination; no compulsory measures will be necessary; they will obey, not from the fear of punishment, but because it is a pleasure to obey. Constant, uniform kindness was my most successful instrument, and I found it more effective than the harsher mode of castigation and cruelty.<sup>19</sup>

This was his method at Cheshire. His view however changed slightly as a result of increased experience and observation. When he opened his Temple school, the very first day, he and the children discussed the problem of discipline, speaking of his duties and theirs; they also considered

. . . various means of producing attention, self-control, perseverance, faithfulness. Among these means, correction was mentioned; and, after a consideration of its nature and issues, they all agreed that it was necessary, and that they preferred Mr. Alcott should correct them rather than leave them in their faults, and that it was his duty to do so. Various punishments were mentioned, and hurting the body was admitted to be necessary and desirable whenever words were found insufficient to command the memory of conscience.<sup>20</sup>

Such punishment should consist of one blow with the ferule upon the hand, more or less severe according to the age and the offence. This was always to be administered in the anteroom and accompanied with conversation. Later a more severe punishment was introduced. The offender was deprived of the pleasure of sharing in the readings. As one boy remarked, a blow was over in

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>19</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 74.

<sup>20</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 15.

a minute, but the readings and conversations could never be theirs.<sup>21</sup> Every shout of laughter from the main room was equivalent to a blow with the ferule. So successful was Alcott in instilling the "love of knowledge for its own sake" that they obeyed, not because of fear of punishment, but rather because they did not wish to miss the instructive and interesting conversations.

One day Alcott introduced an entirely new mode of punishment. It was his much criticized vicarious punishment.

. . . he said that he should have it administered upon his own hand for a time, instead of theirs, but that the guilty person must do it. They declared that they would never do it. They said they preferred being punished themselves. But he determined that they should not escape the pain and the shame of administering the stroke upon him, except by being themselves blameless.<sup>22</sup>

Alcott's aim was to convince his students that his infliction of punishment was not the lack of feeling for their bodies but rather his intense interest in their souls. A new sense of the worth and importance of that for which Alcott was willing to suffer pain dawned upon them. Even the dullest and the coldest understood the lesson taught. As one boy remarked at home, "This is the most complete punishment that a master ever invented, . . ."<sup>23</sup> "Of course such scenes must be rare; but their occurrence even once is enough to spiritualize all the punishments. . ."<sup>24</sup> Because Alcott respected each child's personality, each child respected him, themselves, and one another.

It might seem, from the above discussion, that Alcott had to resort to punishment a great deal, but that was not the case. The Record of a

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

School, which is principally concerned with the problem of discipline in the school, makes this clear. The earnestness and interest of the teacher in the work of the pupils, his evidently strong affection for them, and their reciprocal affection engendered by this, were generally sufficient to produce obedience. Still, the children were led to understand that disobedience could not be tolerated. Corporeal punishment was not entirely discarded, but it was reduced to a minimum.

#### Self-Government

Alcott believed that "all effective government must be self-government."<sup>25</sup> Early in his career, while still at Cheshire, he evolved a plan for pupil participation in the government of the school. Elizabeth Peabody tells us that for many years he never enforced "authority in any instance, unless it was sanctioned by the unanimous voice of a school . . ."<sup>26</sup> Just when such a plan was first used in a classroom is hard to say. As for the United States, one author has said:

It should not be supposed that organized cooperation of pupils in the management of school affairs is a recent innovation. E. D. Grizzell reveals the presence of participation in school government in this country in 1852.<sup>27</sup>

Then he goes on to quote Grizzell's reason for setting that date:

In the high school in Hartford (Connecticut) a system has been introduced of letting the pupils themselves form a tribunal for the judgment of all offences relative to discipline. Every morning after prayers, the annotations made by the monitors on the preceding day, and delivered to the master are submitted to the votes of the pupils. On these

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>26</sup>Idem.

<sup>27</sup>Grizzell quoting from Siljestrom's book, Educational Institutions in the United States, requoted by Drewey, Pupil Participation in High School, p. 3.



occasions each pupil is at liberty to move for such alterations on various points as he may deem desirable, and these motions are then likewise discussed by all. . . The teacher who officiated as chairman had, however, reserved to himself the right of absolute veto. The monitors, who are termed officers, are elected by the people.<sup>28</sup>

Grizzell concludes his discussion of pupil participation by saying:

. . . Although little attention was given by the School Committee to student affairs in its annual report, and as a consequence definite official information is lacking, nevertheless the random bits of evidence indicate some tendency toward student participation in high school management before 1865.<sup>29</sup>

There is no question but that there was some tendency toward pupil participation before this date, for Alcott had a system somewhat similar almost forty years earlier. In his diary for 1826, Alcott explains his system:

At the north end of the room were likewise two desks, elevated above the surface of the floor, so as to give the persons sitting in them an opportunity of overlooking all the other desks. These were intended as stations for an officer called a Superintendent, whose business should be to overlook the conduct of the scholars seated at the lower seats, and, in case of a misdemeanor, to mark down the name and offence of the individual in a record book prepared for that purpose. These superintendents, of whom there are two, one for Masters and one for Misses, are furnished with an assistant superintendent, on whom the office devolves in the absence of the principal, or while he is engaged in study. These superintendents are to be supplied from the classes in turn, holding their offices for the time being, and appointed by the instructor. To be appointed to this office is to be considered a mark of honor and confidence.<sup>30</sup>

A jury, to be instructed by the teacher, acting as judge, was selected to pass judgment on the violators of the twenty-seven laws that the school had drawn up. The judge alone could reprieve the decision. Upon this jury, November 9, 1826, "were chosen by the pupils the first feminine jurymen who ever sat in Connecticut. . . This jury was selected in a sort of town meet-

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<sup>28</sup> Idem.

<sup>29</sup> Idem.

<sup>30</sup> Sanborn and Harris, A Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 79.

ing of the thirty-five pupils who attended the winter school the first day of the term."<sup>31</sup>

When the plan was first presented to her, Elizabeth Peabody had expressed a lack of faith in the plan and predicted various evils;<sup>32</sup> but later she had to admit that Alcott was right in expecting excellent results from it. "The worst boys, when put into that office, become scrupulously just, and get an idea of superintending themselves, which nothing else can give them."<sup>33</sup> Alcott had explained to them, time and again, that they could not put down a name just because they wished to do so. Conscience, not inclination, must write the name.<sup>34</sup> In a later entry in his diary, Alcott expresses his faith in the practical operation of his plan:

The members of our community appear competent for self-government. They are urging their way in the pathway of science, looking to the instructor as a guide and companion. This sentiment on the part of the girls is general; of the few exceptions the boys form the number. . . . The beneficial effects of superintendents in preserving order in school movements is already apparent. It lessens the labors of the Instructor, and prepares young minds for a proper discharge of official duty. The younger members are much pleased with the office. To be allowed a seat in the Forum attaches dignity to the occupant, in their estimation. It also prompts to exercise those feelings of candor and charity by which the great machinery of social life is animated and kept in process; and it offers a comparison by which the Divine omnipresence is brought to the apprehension of children.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup>Elizabeth Peabody, Record of a School, p. 266.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>35</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 81.

### School Library

There are few school libraries in Connecticut. I have seen two or three but they are furnished solely at the expense of the teacher. The school library recently burned in one of the school-houses in New York was valued at \$600. There are not far from 200 school societies in Connecticut, embracing from 1500 to 1800 districts, while I am not informed of the existence of more than one library furnished by the proprietors of the school, in the whole number. Instead of \$600, in a single school, I believe the whole value of all the common school libraries in the State would not, in 1832, exceed \$60.<sup>36</sup>

Bronson Alcott's Cheshire school was one of those who had such a library, but it was paid for out of his own salary. In a historical sketch of the school, he wrote:

A juvenile library of a hundred volumes was purchased and read with much avidity by the scholars. This contributed much to the Instructor's aid, by furnishing excitement and interest during the school exercises. Such measures served also to awaken the public observation in reference to common school instruction, acting upon the minds of a few in the district, and prompting to discussion.<sup>37</sup>

At the commencement of his third term Alcott, thinking the people had been sufficiently liberalized, requested additions to the library but was refused. So he purchased the books himself. The opposition which resulted from such an independent step subsided when it became apparent to the people that the library was a marked asset. The books on the shelf began to excite enormous interest. When it was found that the books from the library were to be "at the perusal of scholars"<sup>38</sup> during the school hours as well as at home, Alcott was swamped with requests for the loan of the volumes.<sup>39</sup> Writing from Wolcott, July 3, 1827, after he had closed the Cheshire school, he said:

<sup>36</sup> Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> Morrow, The Father of Little Women, p. 48.



I established a school library consisting of several hundred volumes, which were read not only by the pupils, but by others in their families, and thus many young minds not immediately under my care received instruction from our library.<sup>40</sup>

Alcott's pioneer work in establishing juvenile libraries bore immediate fruit. Twelve years after his first experiment, Horace Mann, the first Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, in his third report (1839), discussed the reasons why school district libraries should be established. In his fourth report, he enumerated the advantages that arise from their introduction; in his sixth, he reviewed the progress of school district libraries; and in his eighth, he reported the gratifying increase in the number of such institutions. His ninth report began with an interesting table of statistics, showing that there were but twenty-two towns in the Commonwealth which had not availed themselves of the state provision that had been made for school libraries. In his twelfth and final report, he reviewed his past labors, mentioning that in some seven or eight years, district school libraries have risen from nothing to an aggregate of more than 91,000 volumes.<sup>41</sup> There is a slight discrepancy in this last statement, for Alcott had a library in his Temple School as well as in his Cheshire school. Mann's report naturally refers to Massachusetts and the Temple school at Boston should have been included, unless perhaps it was omitted since it was a private school.

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<sup>40</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 74.

<sup>41</sup>The heart of Mann's Reports as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education is found in the American Journal of Education, Vol. V, pp. 623-637.

## CHAPTER III

### ALCOTT'S EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF CLASSROOM TEACHING

One of the commendable traits of character in Alcott was his sincere concern for the pupil's welfare. This led to definite planning as to the best ways of reaching the heart and intellect of the child. The previous chapter has shown how he made an attempt to interest the student in his school life by providing for pleasant surroundings, organized play, pupil participation in the government of the school, and free access to the school library. Besides attempting to secure the necessary goodwill, he also concentrated his efforts upon the learning process. This present chapter, therefore, will deal with Alcott's daily progress and methods of instruction.

#### Daily Program

Alcott realized the importance of a carefully thought out program of studies. Since the pupil, rather than the subject matter, was uppermost in his mind, he sought to arrange his daily program so that it would meet the needs of his pupils. Here he deviated from the customary practice, for, in the majority of the 1,600 school districts of Connecticut, little thought was given to the order of exercises. Barnard called attention to the fact that even in the best schools the arrangements were objectionable.

The morning is devoted to reading and writing, which are branches by no means demanding (at least as they are now taught) any considerable mental effort; while arithmetic, grammar, geography, etc., which require such hard thinking, are deferred to a later hour.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 145.

Almost the opposite arrangement was followed by Alcott. The first hour was reserved for the study of spelling, geography, or grammar, depending upon the day of the week. Should that entire hour be unnecessary for study, the pupils were allowed to write or sketch maps in their individual journals. After this period of quietness, Alcott expected that the children would be settled in their spirits and ready for the day's work. The subjects which he considered of greatest value, spelling, grammar, geography, and reading were all included in the morning schedule. His ten o'clock classes were as follows:<sup>2</sup> Monday, "Spelling with illustrative conversations on the meaning and uses of words"; Tuesday, "Recitations in Geography with Picturesque readings and conversations"; Wednesday, "Readings and conversations on Spirit as displayed in the Life of Christ"; Thursday, "Analyzing speech written and vocal on tablets with illustrative conversations"; Friday, "Readings with illustrative conversations on the sense of the text"; and Saturday, "Readings from works of genius with applications and conversations." About eleven-thirty the children were given time off for recreation on the common or in the anteroom. When school was resumed at twelve o'clock, Alcott provided for "Studying arithmetic with demonstrations in Journals." On Monday and Friday; "Drawings from nature in journal with Mr. Graeter" on Tuesday; "Conversations on the human body and its culture" on Wednesday; "Composing and writing epistle in journals" on Thursday; "Studying arithmetic with illustrations in journals" on Friday; and "review of journal, Week's Conduct and Studies" on Saturday. At one o'clock they were dismissed for refreshments and recreation. Upon their return to

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<sup>2</sup>Wording used as found in Alcott's program of studies, Morrow, The Father of Little Women, p. 125.



the classroom at three, the children continued "studying Latin and Writing in Journals" on Monday; "studying Latin with Recitations" on Tuesday; "Recreation and Duties at home" on Wednesday; "studying Latin with recitations" on Thursday; "studying Latin and Writing in Journals" on Friday; "Recitations and Duties at Home" on Saturday. Whereas most teachers had attempted "to hear a class read, to set copies, mend pens, examine some of their slates, and preserve order, all at one time,"<sup>3</sup> Alcott had formulated a definite system in his teaching. Much class instruction was given.

By his arrangements, Alcott not only selected the best hours for what he considered the main subjects in the curriculum but also provided for much variety in his daily program, wishing to avoid fatigue as much as possible and keep alive the interest of all. He varied the mode of his lesson "in order that it may not sink into a routine,"<sup>4</sup> for it was necessary "to apply the mind in new ways . . ., in order that they should not forget to think."<sup>5</sup>

Another innovation of Alcott's was the inclusion in his curriculum of a class period dealing with home duties. The importance of this addition to the school studies was emphasized by Horace Mann ten years later.

The moral instruction given by the teacher should have reference to their duties in school and at home; the duty of cultivating the spirit of honor and kindness to each other; the desire of aiding each other's improvement; the cowardice and meanness of attributing to others our own faults and offenses; the despicable character of falsehood and deception. . .<sup>6</sup>

Again he says, this time in his twelfth and final report as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education:

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<sup>3</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. 1, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>6</sup>Abridged in part from an article in Livingston's Law Journal, quoted in American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 630.

The attempt to give to all the children of a community a careful moral training has not yet, however, been made; and, till this fails, we need not despair.<sup>7</sup>

This moral training was one of Alcott's strong points. Two hours a week were set aside for regular period discussions. Then whenever possible, he introduced it in his other courses, for, like Mann, Alcott regarded moral improvement as important as intellectual.<sup>8</sup> During the years 1835 and 1836 every Wednesday morning was devoted to direct moral and religious instruction. The first hour, they studied the Gospel and wrote in their journals; the next hour-and-a-half, Alcott conducted the dialogues which were published in two volumes - Conversations on the Gospels. An hour-and-a-half seems long; but, judging from the children's own statements as recorded in the Conversations, Alcott succeeded marvelously in creating and maintaining their interest. Some of the children were so pleased with the dialogues that they requested him to conduct similar ones on Sunday. This he did, apparently with much success.<sup>9</sup>

Two new subjects introduced into the curriculum by Alcott were geography and physiology. That geography was not a regular course in the average program of studies in 1824 is a matter of history.

The friends of education who read this sketch, hardly need be told that up to this period, geography as a science, had received but little attention in the public schools of New England; with the exception of a few more favored of the larger schools, spelling, reading, and writing, were nearly all the branches that received special attention . . . As for geography, some few schools studied Morse, a few others used a sort of reading book, Nathaniel Dwight's System of Geography, which was arranged in the form of questions and answers. The

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 636.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 630.

<sup>9</sup>This step, however, aroused the suspicions of the parents who began to fear that the teacher was trying to change their traditional religious views. Eventually it led to the Temple failure.

vast majority, however, paid no attention whatever to the subject.<sup>10</sup>

Even as late as 1830 the place of geography was very insecure.

Spelling, reading, writing, and arithmetic are taught in nearly every school. Geography and grammar have within a few years been introduced very extensively, but in many places not without great opposition. Even arithmetic, until within a few years, was excluded from many schools during the day, and only permitted to be taught in the evening schools. Grammar and geography were opposed, but with less violence; and it is worthy of remark that an additional higher branch can now be introduced into a school with far less difficulty than formerly.<sup>11</sup>

Alcott, unlike most of his fellow teachers, introduced the subject and what was more emphasized it. Only a few details from Elizabeth Peabody's lengthy account will be noted here. Whenever it was possible, Alcott correlated literature with geography. Descriptions of whaling, of seal catching, of pearl diving, and of other interesting occupations added much to the meager discussions in the textbooks. Such books as Columbus's Journal, Flint's Valley of the Mississippi, and Irving's books of travel were read. He often introduced many engravings and paintings to illustrate the subject under discussion. Globes, blackboards, and other apparatus were in frequent use to make the instruction more intelligible and real. It seems that globes and blackboards were almost unknown in the district schools of Connecticut, for Barnard states that, "In a few instances where they were introduced, their utility and economy has been satisfactorily proved, but "of the few who have seen or heard of them, the greater part dread expense, and fear innovation."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> William Alcott, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 145.



The other subject, physiology, Alcott did not feel competent enough to teach, so he secured an assistant. Almost the only statement of significance in connection with the teaching of this subject is the one made by Blankenship, "The introduction into the curriculum of an elementary lesson in physiology caused the withdrawal of about two-thirds of the school."<sup>13</sup> Since Alcott did not teach this course, Elizabeth Peabody has left it out of her account.

#### Instruction in the Main Branches of Study

In summarizing his discussion of teaching methods in the elementary schools of Connecticut, Barnard deplures the low aim of teachers in general:

. . . the great object seems to be to go through with a certain amount of processes, and commit to memory a certain amount of words and sentences, in the various branches, with a kind of confused idea that the knowledge will be the necessary result. The number of children who are trained to think, - to teach themselves, and to study things, rather than receive into their minds a mass of words, which they cannot understand, or ideas which they know not how to use of apply, is by no means large.<sup>14</sup>

Teachers, with a narrow view of their professional duties, seemed to be satisfied as long as their students mastered the required amount of memory work. Perhaps many a child felt as the thirteen-year old Bronson Alcott did when he said to Tillotson Bronson:

It's all show, sir. They learn everything by rote just as we did at Spindle Hall. . . What's the use, Uncle, of learning by rote when you don't understand it? I can learn words by myself. What I want the teacher to show me is how to understand things! . . . What I want the teacher to do is

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Blankenship, American Literature, p. 313.

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American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 146.

to train the thing that I understand with, so he won't have to explain what's in the lesson books.<sup>15</sup>

This was a youthful but lofty conception of the teacher's position. Finally he was called upon to live up to the high standard he had advocated. It is to his credit that, despite the unpopularity of his methods, he remained true to his ideals.

When he began to teach, he discovered that the "positively stupefying process" of committing to memory useless and often meaningless bits of knowledge was still popular in the schools. Barnard, in speaking of the average pupil and his training in spelling, says:

. . . But he learns mechanically; for he rarely connects or associates a single idea with a word, any more than if he were committing to memory tables of Latin or Greek. It is in this way that we are to account for the fact, that on visiting a school, the pupils are frequently found able to spell by column nearly all the words of the book, while the best of them will misspell a great number of words, when they attempt to compose a letter, or write from dictation. Defining is very much neglected throughout the State. Few schools pay any attention at all to the subject. A certain number of columns is usually assigned as a spelling lesson, which the pupils are required to study over and over; and at a certain hour, the teacher pronounces them with as much rapidity as possible. . .<sup>16</sup>

Alcott had not tolerated this method as a student, neither would he do so as a teacher. Since he considered spelling one of the most important exercises of the school, he was not satisfied with making a hasty assignment and an equally hasty check up. Every child was given a desk copy of Johnson's dictionary, at that time the most popular one on the market, and expected to learn the exact meanings of the words assigned. In preparation for their daily lessons, he advised them to write the words on their slates

<sup>15</sup>Honore' Willsie Morrow, The Father of Little Women, pp. 26-27.

<sup>16</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, pp. 144-145.

or in their manuscript books and to spell them to themselves. Then he directed them to imagine sentences in which the words were correctly used. In class, these words were taken up, one by one, and illustrations given of all their meanings, literal and imaginative, either by original or remembered sentences. Their attention was fixed upon the precise letters used and their sounds in each particular instance, synonymous words were brought up for consideration and discriminated between, and often Latin origins were referred to. He trained the children to think of the words and their various meanings. The spelling and pronunciation were important, but the soul of the language<sup>17</sup> took precedence. Alcott went a step further and insisted that the children carry the correctness of speech into their writings. He realized that his methods were greatly in advance of his day; and, therefore, was not surprised at the indifference of the public. This can be seen from the following entry in his diary for January 14, 1828:

It cannot be expected that those who estimate progress in their children by the readiness with which they can spell long columns of words, of whose meaning they know nothing, should approve our plan, or estimate our labor of much worth; for in these things we do nothing, nor do we intend to waste our time in the useless, the positively stupefying process of conning long words from a spelling book, or in committing, and reciting rules and sentences of which they know nothing.<sup>18</sup>

Alcott's revolutionary tendencies were also seen in his teaching of writing, a part of the school program that was "much neglected."<sup>19</sup> Believing that in order to become a good writer one had to have a clear conception of beautiful forms in the mind as well as skill to guide the hand,<sup>20</sup> he stressed the importance of keen observation. Therefore, the first dis-

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<sup>17</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup>Sanborn and Harris, A Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, p. 107.

<sup>19</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 128.



cipline to which he subjected his pupils was that of the eye.

With such education of the eye, as a preliminary, reading and writing are begun simultaneously; and the former will be very much facilitated, and the latter come to perfection, in much shorter time than by the usual mode. By copying print, which does not require such sweeps of hand as script character, a clear image of each letter is gradually fixed in the mind; and while the graceful curves of the script are not attained till afterwards, yet they are attained quite as early as by the common method of beginning with them; and the clearness and distinctness of print is retained in the script, which, from being left to form itself so freely, becomes also characteristic of each individual's particular mind.<sup>21</sup>

The slate and pencil or the chalk and blackboard were practically indispensable in the early part of the process of learning to write. Alcott felt that they could not be used early enough; this was especially true of the blackboard, "for children should have free scope, as we find that their first shapings are usually gigantic."<sup>22</sup> Often times the writing, when first presented to Alcott, was almost unintelligible; but, since the children gave the impression that there was a real resemblance between the original and their own product, Alcott never rudely pointed out its misgivings. He took the writing for what the child thought it was, confident that eventually practice would bring about the desirable effect whereas criticism would check youthful courage and self-confidence. Naturally, there was a vast amount of difference in individual improvement, some picking up the technique of writing more quickly than others. Still, he would never hurry the process but wait for natural development. Elizabeth Peabody had much confidence in Alcott's system. She claims that the ultimate and sure result of his plan is

. . . simple, unflourishing chirography, whose great and characteristic merit is intelligibleness; and constant

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>22</sup>Idem.

practice in writing the script gradually adds to this merit the grace of beauty. When a child begins on this plan of writing at five years of age, by the time he is seven or eight he has much of the ease of the practiced penman, combining considerable rapidity with perfect intelligibility and a fair degree of beauty. Mr. Alcott has verified this in hundreds of instances, in his own schools, within ten years.<sup>23</sup>

Reading, as most commonly taught consisted in "pronouncing correctly the words of a given sentence, verse, or paragraph. With larger classes, half an hour is sometimes spent in this manner. In some instances, the pupils are taught to observe, with a measured accuracy, the pauses which occur, and still more rarely to imitate the inflections, tones, and emphasis of the teacher."<sup>24</sup> Alcott saw the fallacies of this method of teaching. Neither the heart nor the mind were moved; consequently, no actual good resulted. His problem was to make the children's reading thoughtful. In order to accomplish his purpose, he asked questions continually and called for mental pictures, analogies, and illustrations. Instead of teaching them to pronounce meaningless words, he taught them to interpret what they read. Just as in writing, he never hurried a child over the mechanical part of the process. He was severely criticized for his method, but Elizabeth Peabody felt that this attitude on the part of the people was the result of a misunderstanding or misinterpretation. She paid Alcott a high compliment when she said:

It will probably, however, be difficult to find children who know so well how to use a book when they are eight years old as those who have been taught on his method, which never allows a single step to be taken, in any stage of the process without a great deal of thinking on the part of the child.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>24</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 145.

<sup>25</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 26.

Alcott's course of study provides for three kinds of reading classes, one of which was "Readings from works of genius with applications and conversations." His reason for making a distinction between this and the other two reading classes, "Readings and conversations on Spirit as displayed in the life of Christ" and "Readings with illustrative conversations on the sense of the text," was his belief that reading by the teacher was indispensable in the early training of children. Even the best reading that the children could do for themselves could not take the place of the teacher's readings to the class. The latter put them in possession of thoughts of genius, taught them to sympathize with the inspired feelings expressed by the writers, and, to a large extent, formulated their tastes. "Every book read should be an event to a child; and all his plans of teaching" kept "steadily in view the object of making books live, breathe, and speak. . ."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, superficial reading was discouraged. Reports came back from the homes of his pupils that the children, instead of showing an interest in the light juvenile fiction, read over and over again the books of classical literature which he had read to them during the school hours.<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Peabody was asked frequently the question, "Will children ever be willing to study from books who have been educated by Mr. Alcott?" Her answer, as given in her explanatory chapter, was:

. . . they will study from books more intelligently, thoroughly, and profoundly, just in proportion as they imbibe the spirit of his instructions; for they will have a clearly defined object whenever they open a book, and the beautiful things Mr. Alcott constantly reads to them have a tendency to make them feel what treasures are locked up in books. Yet

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<sup>26</sup> Idem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 277.



they may not be bookworms. They learn that there are other sources of knowledge, and especially that thought is the chief source of wisdom.<sup>28</sup>

It is true that Alcott was more interested in preparing his scholars to receive book learning "after they have left than to give it to them himself at the early age when they are under his own care."<sup>29</sup> Activity of mind and a taste for intellectual pursuits were, he thought, vastly more important;<sup>30</sup> yet he did not ignore book learning.

It appears, from the following indictment, that rote memorization had a prominent place also in grammar teaching: "Geography and grammar are committed to memory rather than taught, for after years of study in those schools where they are permitted, the pupils often have little or no practical knowledge of either, especially the former."<sup>31</sup> Alcott, however, tried to reduce this memorization to a minimum. He taught his pupils the principles of classification but not the nomenclature. A regular exercise of the class consisted of the analysis of sentences and classification of words according to their meanings. The following analysis, made on January 5, 1835, would not be out of place in a twentieth century grammar text:<sup>32</sup>

Why gaze ye on my hoary hairs,  
Ye children, young and gay?  
Your locks, beneath the blast of care,  
Will bleach as white as they.

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<sup>28</sup>Idem.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>30</sup>Idem.

<sup>31</sup>Barnard, American Journal of Education, Vol. V, p. 145.

<sup>32</sup>Peabody, Record of a School, p. 68.

Objects	Actions	Qualities	Substitutes	Relations
hairs	gave	why	ye	on
children	will bleach	hoary	my	beneath
looks		young	ye	
blaste		gay	your	
cares		white	they	

Although much time was spent on such technical grammar, still, it was taught to the children only after they had had considerable practice in writing. Composition, in other words, took precedence. As soon as the child could write the script hand so that it could be read, Alcott led them to express their thoughts in a journal. At first, the compositions were merely jottings down of "dry and uninteresting circumstances,"<sup>33</sup> but Alcott said little. He feared that, if he attempted too much petty criticism, he might actually hinder his own purposes. Since his aim was "to produce a sense of freedom as a condition of free expression,"<sup>34</sup> he simply suggested that he hoped they would soon add more thought to their record of facts. He respected the child's natural modesty which would prevent him, at first, from revealing his innermost thoughts but hoped, by suggestion, to tempt them to free expression.

He has little reliance on any method of producing the impulse to composition except the indirect one of leading children to think vividly and consecutively, which leads of itself to expression. And still less has he any reliance upon the power of a composition which was not the result of an inward impulse. A mere mechanical exercise leads to a tame and feeble style, which is a misfortune to acquire, and which generates no desire to write more; but it is spontaneous to endeavor to express energetically what one feels vividly and conceives clearly, and any degree of success in this inspires ardor for new attempts.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Idem.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

"He did not expect interesting views from them until their minds were more thoroughly trained to self inspection and inward thought."<sup>36</sup> It was the children's natural development that determined for Alcott the methods to be used in the classroom.

In general, Alcott's teaching methods aimed primarily at natural growth and not at a mere accumulation of facts, for knowledge in itself was insufficient. He agreed with Locke that the process of learning was more important than the thing learned and with Rousseau that the use of stiff and unnatural methods in education and excessive emphasis upon book learning had no place in the schoolroom. Real education is an expansion, a drawing out, and a widening out. The method that Alcott considered most effective for this purpose, and therefore the one that he used most extensively, was the conversational method. He tried to entice from the minds of the pupils the facts of their innermost consciousness and make them apprehend their own power. "Alcott declares that a teacher is one who can assist the child in obeying his own mind, and who can remove all unfavorable circumstances. He believes that from a circle of twenty well selected children he could draw in their conversations everything that is in Plato. . . ." <sup>37</sup> A wise instructor would always try to stimulate the children's imagination, train them in rational thinking, and awaken their latent powers.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>37</sup> Emerson's Journal for 1838, Vol. VII, p. 499, quoted by Sanborn and Harris, A. Bronson Alcott, Vol. 1, footnote p. 185.



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