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ORIGINAL PAPER

An Easy and Well-Ordered Way to Learn: Schooling at Home in Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins* and *Jack and Jill*

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Abstract Louisa May Alcott's juvenile fiction is often focused on aspects of children's lives that were also topics of reform in nineteenth century America. In *Jack and Jill* and *Eight Cousins*, Alcott presents an idealized picture of child-centered learning, building on three central principals: (1) Good teachers are sympathetic and understanding of children; (2) Every child needs to be healthy in order to learn; and (3) Children should be allowed to explore their world through self-directed, active learning. The ideal educational environment that she describes has much in common with the theories of John Dewey that would emerge some years later; using Dewey's writings can give further insight into Alcott's fiction. In this article, I argue that Alcott sees the world from the perspective of her young characters, and describes it in a way that simultaneously connects to her young readers and gives adults insight into the child's world.

Keywords Louisa May Alcott · *Jack and Jill* · *Eight Cousins* · Education · Childhood

Louisa May Alcott signed many of her letters with "yours for reform of all kinds," and in her fiction, she addresses many types of reform, from women's dress to temperance. Her stories written for a younger audience can be used to explore many aspects of children's lives: their health, their need for self-expression, and the social

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skills they gain through play. Her juvenile fiction presents the world of childhood with respect and understanding.

Alcott writes in *Jack and Jill* that "School is a child's world while he is there, and its small affairs are very important to him" (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 152), so it is not surprising that issues surrounding school and education appear in several stories and novels. She contrasts traditional nineteenth century education practices with education led by parents in a home setting. Alcott was not a teacher, but she had firm views on the value of education and what form it should take.

Louisa May Alcott was surrounded by educators and talk about education. Her father, Bronson Alcott, was an educator who believed children's education should allow them the freedom to develop their natural inclinations. He wrote, "the intellectual faculties which, among others, should become subjects of cultivation in the school-room, are imagination, association, attention, taste, memory, judgment, reflection, and reason" (quoted in Duran, 2009, p. 233). Among other reforms, Bronson Alcott emphasized conversation and inquiry over memorization, and allowed his students time for physical activity (otherwise known as recess). Bronson's transcendentalist friends were a key part of Louisa's education. Ralph Waldo Emerson directed some of young Louisa's reading choices, and Henry David Thoreau took the village children on field trips to teach them about botany. Louisa and her sisters were mostly taught at home, and all of them grew up to be creative, independent women with a love of learning.

Although Louisa Alcott never attended school, she did hear the complaints of the school children of Concord, which her characters voice in book after book, including Tom in *An Old Fashioned Girl*: "I'd like [Latin] well enough if there was anyone to explain it to me. Old Deane puts us through double-quick and don't give a fellow time to ask questions when we read" (Alcott, 1987/1997, p. 48). As with the other social issues she includes in her fiction, Alcott presents a child-centered solution for the problems in education. In her presentation of an ideal educational setting, Alcott anticipates John Dewey's constructivism (originally called progressivism). Although there is no evidence that I am aware of that Dewey knew of Bronson Alcott's educational philosophy, Dewey's theories did grow out of the general tenets of Transcendentalist philosophy (Bickman, 2002). Dewey's statements on education, seen in juxtaposition to Louisa Alcott's fiction, provides the philosophical underpinning to the character's statements and actions. (A full description of the similarities between Dewey's philosophy and that of the Transcendentalists is beyond the scope of this article.) Connecting Alcott's fictional world to Dewey's observations and arguments leads to a deeper understanding of Alcott's work. I argue that Alcott's educational views come from her child-centered focus. Her descriptions of learning are from the child's perspective, and not limited to the classroom. No matter what topic she addresses in her fiction, Alcott presents the world from the perspective of her young characters, and describes it in a way that simultaneously connects to her young readers and gives adults insight into the child's world.

Traditional nineteenth century education centered around basic knowledge in reading, writing, handwriting, grammar, math, spelling, geography, and history. Boys who would be going to college also needed instruction in Greek, Latin, and

algebra, but most students would not be progressing beyond what we think of as an eighth grade education. Education historians, when writing on nineteenth century education, frequently focus on the development of theories or changing demographics. Depictions of the daily life in classrooms are harder to find, though some contemporary accounts do exist. Spring (1990) and Perkinson (1991) both write about changing status of teachers, but spend little time on the experience of students. Newman (1990), in his description of the history of American education, gives details of who controlled the schools and the major arguments over curriculum decisions, but does not write about the children who attended these schools or learned this curriculum. In these analyses of nineteenth century education, the village schools, which successive generations of children attended, are largely ignored. They may also have been ignored by reformers of the time; Reese (2000) writes that "cities…were the most successful at adopting a more standardized curriculum" (p. 21), implying that smaller communities continued to follow their own established traditions, regardless of what was going on elsewhere.

The descriptions of the classroom that we do have paint a clear picture of what traditional methods of education would look like. In the nineteenth century, large classrooms with up to 200 students were common, which required management techniques that emphasized quiet seat work, and teaching methods that were centered on the teacher. As Finkelstein (1989) notes, "Students recited passages from textbooks, worked at their desks on assignments, or listened to the teacher and classmates during time set aside for instruction. Teachers assigned work and expected uniformity from students both in behavior and in classwork" (pp. 44–45). Desks were bolted to the floor, and movement was discouraged. Critical thinking, student-directed learning, and hands-on lessons were rarely seen. One example from an 1892 geography class observed by Joseph Rice in Boston deftly illustrates this. The students are told to open their geography books to the map of North America. "When the map had been found each pupil placed his forefinger upon 'Cape Farewell,' and then ran their fingers down the map, calling out the names of each cape as it was touched….When the books had been closed, they ran their fingers down the cover and named from memory the capes in their order from north to south" (Rice, 1893/1969, pp. 139–140). Schools remained this way for a long time, despite the efforts of many people, including Bronson Alcott. Amid the focus on the major changes in education during this time, the voice of the child and the classroom teacher is largely absent. This voice can be found, however, in children's stories. Louisa May Alcott is not concerned with the arguments over educational theory, or how teachers should be trained. She is not an educator or philosopher. She aims for authenticity in her characters, and thus describes school as she believes the children see it.

While Louisa May Alcott only occasionally sets a scene inside a classroom, the reader does get enough of a description from several books to know how her characters feel about the institution of school. In *Little Women*, Amy attends a "fashionable" city school. Alcott describes Mr. Davis, the teacher, as having no talent for teaching, though he "knew any quantity of Greek, Latin, Algebra, and ologies of all sorts" (Alcott, 1868/1994, p. 69). The classroom has 50 girls, who are apparently hard to control, with gum chewing, note passing, and novel reading. In

An Old Fashioned Girl, Polly goes to school with Fanny one day for her French and music lessons. At school, the girls "gabbled over the lesson, wrote an exercise, and read a little French history" (Alcott, 1870/1997, p. 18). This teacher gets off a little better than Mr. Davis in *Little Women*; he is "ready to explain," but the girls aren't interested (Alcott, 1868/1994, p. 18). They are more focused on socializing and making plans for the afternoon. For these girls, who are preparing for fashionable life, schooling doesn't seem that important. Unlike boys, who can focus on college preparation, these girls do not see education as a necessary goal. There is no spark of interest created by the teacher, and no connection made to the students' lives.

In *Little Men*, which is set in a boarding school, Alcott gives several examples of children who were essentially ruined by traditional schooling. Billy, for example, has had a breakdown and now cannot learn at all:

> …his father had hurried him on too fast… expecting him to absorb knowledge as a Strasburg goose does the food crammed down his throat. …a fever gave the poor child a sad holiday, and when he recovered, the overtasked brain gave out, and Billy's mind was like a slate over which a sponge has passed, leaving it blank. (Alcott, 1871/1994, p. 22)

This description is particularly interesting in light of John Locke's view of the mind as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) which is filled by the teacher during the learning process, which stands in opposition to theories that focus on building on the knowledge a child brings with him into the classroom. Alcott presents the blank slate as a problem, not an apt metaphor for the learning process. She also presents excessive education, pushed by a parent who does not understand his son's needs, as a health issue.

In *Eight Cousins*, Rose describes her time at boarding school. She tells her friend Phebe: "I've been at boarding school nearly a year, and I'm almost dead with lessons. The more I got, the more Miss Power gave me, and I was so miserable I 'most cried my eyes out" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 6). To her uncle, she says

> I declare my head used to be such a jumble of French and German, history and arithmetic, grammar and music, I used to feel sometimes as if it would split. I'm sure I don't wonder it ached. (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 70)

All of these characters understand that their job as students is to repeat back the memorized facts, without real understanding. They cannot ask questions, and there is no personal connection to the material. Over-educating causes physical pain, and sometimes irreparable damage. This is perhaps an exaggeration on Alcott's part, but she gets her point across. Fifty years later, John Dewey makes a similar observation in "School Conditions and the Training of Thought":

> Children are hushed up when they ask questions; their exploring and investigating activities are inconvenient and hence they are treated like nuisances; pupils are taught to memorize things so that merely one-track verbal associations are set up instead of varied and flexible connections with things themselves. (Dewey, 1964, p. 230)

Dewey believed that the traditional mode of education was doing a disservice to the students. He wanted to create a classroom where students were actively engaged, and did so at his laboratory school in the 1890s. One proponent of progressive education was Joseph Rice, who traveled the country observing schools, and published a book with his observations. He described the difference between traditional education and progressivism as one of differing goals:

> while the aim of the old education is mainly to give the child a certain amount of information, the aim of the new education is to lead the child to observe, to reason, and to acquire manual dexterity as well as to memorize facts – in a word, to develop the child naturally in all his faculties, intellectual, moral, and physical. (Rice, 1893/1969, p. 21)

Neither Alcott nor Dewey is willing to just identify the problem. Both present solutions, and much of their philosophy is similar. Alcott's solution to these education problems is most clearly described in *Jack and Jill* and *Eight Cousins.* These novels, often overlooked in the Alcott canon, give the most explicit examples of how academic subjects such as science and history are taught in the home environment. Both stories focus on the relationship between children and their guardians, especially as it relates to the issue of education.[1]

Eight Cousins tells the story of 13-year old Rose Campbell's first year living with her uncle and two great aunts. Rose was raised by her father, away from the rest of the family, until his death. After a year at boarding school, Rose joins Uncle Alec, moving into Great Aunt Plenty's house. Nearby are four aunts, one uncle (married to one of the aunts), and seven cousins.

Through the course of the novel, Rose goes from a sad, listless child to one full of health and energy. Like most of Alcott's juvenile novels, *Eight Cousins* is a series of vignettes. The overall plot follows Uncle Alec's experiment: he intends to restore Rose's health with fresh air, exercise, and rest. She does not go to school; instead he teaches her using a method best described as active learning. Alcott knows that her readers will focus on the educational aspects of the story: in the preface she writes "Uncle Alec's experiment was intended to amuse the young folks rather than suggest educational improvements for the consideration of the elders." Yet she also demonstrates that the "experiment" works. In the final chapter, Rose is asked to choose which of her relatives she wants to live with. Among her choices are Aunt Jane, who believes in schools that focus on constant studying, and Aunt Clara, who will send Rose to a finishing school focused on social graces. Rose chooses Uncle Alec as the one she'll be "happiest with" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 235); her education will continue as it has begun.

Jack and Jill is a story about a group of children living in a New England village. The focus is on two children who are injured in a sledding accident: Jack Minot, 13 years old, who breaks his leg, and Jill Pecq, who severely injures her back.

[1] The choice of these two books means that *Little Men*, which is the only book fully set in a school, is left out. But the focus of *Little Men* is not academic learning. *Little Men* is about how school can teach character, not how best to teach geography. I find it interesting that in her books about home, Alcott writes about teaching health, geography, and history, and in her book about school, she writes about teaching morality, honesty, and caring for others.

Jack lives with his mother and 16 year old brother Frank in a big house with servants; Jill lives next door in a small cottage with her mother. After the accident, Jill and her mother come to live with the Minots. Mrs. Pecq becomes the housekeeper, and Mrs. Minot nurses Jill, who is bed-ridden for most of the book. *Jack and Jill* is established as a book about school friends on the third page, when school is first mentioned: The girls say that Jill is at the head of the class. She is poor, but smart, and education is the key to her future. The village school is not presented as negatively as the schools in Alcott's other books; it is clear that the children like going to school, but the institution is still not perfect.

Jill studies at home because she *cannot* go to school, but by the end of the novel, Mrs. Minot has decided to keep her boys home as well, so that they can achieve a better balance of activity and study, and to include Molly and Merry, two of Jill's friends. The last few chapters of *Jack and Jill* describe Mrs. Minot's experiment in education. Alcott shows through the experiences of Mrs. Minot's five students that education is best achieved when study is mixed with play and exercise. Alcott closes *Jack and Jill* with the friends going on a picnic. She paints a picture of a group of happy, healthy children, ready for whatever their future might hold.

Jack and Jill and *Eight Cousins* have several educational themes in common. Alcott presents an idealized picture of child-centered learning, building on the following:

- Good teachers are sympathetic and understanding of children
- Every child needs to be healthy in order to learn, and
- Children should be allowed to explore their world through self-directed, active learning.

This last point is also one of the core beliefs of constructivism. John Dewey's students constructed their knowledge through hands-on activities. There was no listening quietly while sitting at a desk. Like Bronson Alcott, who insisted on large windows and benches with backs, Dewey realized that he needed a different physical set-up in the classroom to achieve results. When shopping for desks for his school, he could not find what he was looking for. Dewey records the response of one dealer in *The School and Society*: "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening" (Dewey, 1959, pp. 31–32). When Louisa May Alcott describes lessons at home, they take place at large tables, or outside. Never does she have the parent get a school desk installed in the house.

Good Teachers are Sympathetic and Understanding of Children

Throughout Alcott's juvenile fiction, she contrasts cold, unfeeling adults with sympathetic adults, who are always willing to answer children's questions. The most direct example is in *An Old Fashioned Girl*: Polly sees Maud's mother pushing her away because the little girl's hands are dirty and reflects that her own mother is never so dressed up that she won't hug her children (Alcott, 1870/1997, p. 106). The father in *Little Men* who overtasks his son is presented as both a failed teacher and a

failed parent. In Alcott's ideal world, the best parents take time to be with their children, listen to them, and help them to grow. The sympathetic adult understands that childhood has its trials. Part of the sympathy towards children that the ideal adults display is their willingness to teach the children about the world. It is these adults whom Alcott positions as teachers. Parents who lack some essential characteristic are not shown as teachers, not even as teachers of morals or life skills.

Mrs. Minot sometimes speaks as though she's read Dewey's 1933 article on reflective thinking. She says,

> busy minds must be fed, but not crammed… there is to be no studying at night, no shutting up all the best hours of the day, no hurry and fret of getting on fast, or skimming over the surface of many studies without learning any thoroughly. (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 267)

In "Why Reflective Thinking Must be an Educational Aim" Dewey writes:

> Fewer subjects and fewer facts and more responsibility for thinking the material of those subjects and facts through to realize what they involve would give better results. (Dewey, 1964, p. 227)

Both Dewey and Alcott believe that the teacher should lead the student to deeper knowledge, which requires understanding of both the subject and the child. The parent/teacher is often in the best position for this.

When Alcott has a parent teaching academic subjects to a child at home, it is an educated parent. Mrs. Minot was a school teacher before her marriage; Alec is a doctor. They are educated, and well-suited to the task. They are also examples of Alcott's sympathetic adults. Mrs. Minot moves Jill and her mother into the house to help Jill recover from the accident in a more comfortable environment. Alec is always willing to explain his choices to Rose, whether it is why he wants her to eat porridge for breakfast or why she should learn to row a boat. Both Alec and Mrs. Minot understand the needs of their young charges, and when they plan lessons, they do so with that understanding.

As the penultimate chapter of *Jack and Jill* opens, Frank and Jack are getting ready to start school after summer break, and Jill is hoping she will be able to go back to school soon. Mrs. Minot sees that her older son is focused on studying, but neglects exercise. Alcott writes that his books "ruled him with a rod of iron when he once gave himself up to them" (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 265), and he studies until his head hurts. Jack is still not fully recovered from his broken leg and needs regular exercise. Alcott, in the voice of Mrs. Minot, argues for balance:

> For the next two or three years I intend to cultivate my boys' bodies, and let their minds rest a good deal, from books at least. There is plenty to learn outside of school-houses, and I don't mean to shut you up just when you most need all the air and exercise you can get. Good health, good principles, and a good education are the three blessings I ask for you, and I am going to make sure of the first, as a firm foundation for the other two. (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 266)

She is not giving them a vacation, however. The boys will still go to school to "recite at certain hours such things as seem most important" (Alcott, 1880/1999,

p. 267), but they will study subjects in depth, focusing on learning, not memorization.

Jill needs an education to make her way in the world, but is too ill to go to school. Since Jill cannot physically go to the schoolhouse (or sit in those bolted down desks), she is happy with the new plan. Her friends Merry and Molly, who will be joining the new school, also need the guiding hand of a sympathetic adult. Molly's mother died years ago; her father sees that she "needs a sort of care" that his housekeeper cannot provide (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 268). Merry's mother sees that Merry also needs "more exercise and less study," and so agrees to let Merry join "the friendly circle" when she requests it (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 272). It is because Mrs. Minot is aware of the needs of all five children that she decides to conduct her experiment.

Uncle Alec's first conversation with Rose establishes him as someone who cares about her welfare above all else. In that conversation, he asks her what her "troubles" are, and listens as she tells him (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 22). Her last trouble is her uncertainty about her new guardian, and though she cannot put it into words (partly because of embarrassment), Alec understands, and replies, "I don't expect you to love and trust me all at once, but I do want you to believe that I shall give my whole heart to this new duty" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 24). He acknowledges their shared grief over her father's (his brother's) death as he begins to build a relationship with her.

Uncle Alec is not a trained teacher, but like Mrs. Minot, he has firm views on the subject. He also has a wide range of experiences to draw upon. After Rose and Alec visit a warehouse, he frames it as a lesson:

> "This is not a bad way to study geography, is it?" asked her uncle.
>
> "It is a very pleasant way, and I really think I have learned more about China today than in all the lessons I had at school, though I used to rattle off the answers as fast as I could go. No one explained anything to us, so all I remember is that tea and silk come from there, and the women have little bits of feet."
>
> "We will have out the maps and the globe, and I'll show you some of my journeys, telling stories as we go. That will be next best to doing it actually." (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 65)

Alec will make the geography lessons real and personal, not just a series of dry facts. He is an expert in geography because of his travels—not because of a classroom education. Rose will not be memorizing the names of the capes on the Eastern seaboard. She will be listening to stories, seeing the artifacts that her Uncle has brought with him. It seems that Uncle Alec understands Rose wants to know about him, and with geography lessons he can tell her about himself and teach at the same time. His understanding of her needs is part of what makes his education plan a success.

Every Child Needs to be Healthy in Order to Learn

Alcott says over and over again in her fiction that children need to be healthy enough for school. Jill is the most obvious example. She is physically incapacitated;

by the end of *Jack and Jill* she can walk around the room, but not much more than that. But Frank also needs better health. His mother does not want to send him to college unless he is physically able to do the serious studying that will be required. When he protests putting off college for a year, she tells him, "I cannot have you break down, as so many boys do, or pull through at the cost of ill-health afterward" (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 266). She sees that a lack of health can interfere with education and wants to avoid that with her son.

As the new schooling begins, health and exercise are clearly central to Mrs. Minot's plan. The boys look after the horse and the garden as part of their lessons; the girls go out driving. Everyone's health improves; Frank finds he sleeps better with more exercise and less study.

> Harvesting beans and raking up leaves seemed to have a soothing effect upon [Frank's] nerves, for now he fell asleep at once instead of thumping his pillow with vexation because his brain would go on working at difficult problems and passages when he wanted it to stop. (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 271)

Adding regular physical activity to their day has given the boys balance. The girls' curriculum includes health lessons from a female doctor friend of Mrs. Minot. Alcott contrasts traditional curriculum with a more practical knowledge of how life works:

> Mrs. Hammond often came into give them a little lecture, teaching them to understand the wonders of their own systems, and how to keep them in order, – a lesson of far more importance just then than Greek or Latin… (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 272)

Alcott is not specific about what the girls learn, but it may be significant that Mrs. Hammond is a *female* doctor. At the very least, the girls probably learn some of what Rose in *Eight Cousins* learns about the importance of not wearing tight corsets.

Uncle Alec is a medical doctor, with firm views of health, and his first changes to Rose's life start with a simple, healthy diet and exercise. As Rose gets healthier, Aunt Clara worries that Rose's figure is getting 'ruined,' and tries to suggest a corset. Alec responds by giving Rose lessons in physiology. Rose learns the skeleton first, and the floating ribs, to understand why Uncle Alec doesn't like corsets and tight lacing. She tells one of the aunts, "that's why [the ribs] go in so easily if you lace tight and squeeze the lungs and heart" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 176). Uncle Alec tells Aunt Myra that he intends that "Rose shall understand and respect her body so well that she won't dare to trifle with it as most women do" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 176). Rose is also encouraged to be physically active, so that she will build a foundation for a healthy life.

Mac, one of Rose's cousins, later joins in the physiology lessons, at first because he is bored, but then because he is interested. He is temporarily unable to go to school because of a heatstroke. Rose suggests Uncle Alec teach them about eyes, since Mac has strained his with studying in too bright sunlight (again, studying too much causes health issues). Uncle Alec's lesson on the workings of the eye is not a dry lecture; Rose and Mac are interested partly because they have already learned that health is important. They find it "as wonderful as a fairy tale, for fine plates

illustrated it, and a very willing teacher did his best to make the lesson pleasant" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 179). For Mac the lesson comes a bit late, and he knows it. "Why isn't a fellow taught all about his works, and how to manage 'em, and not left to go blundering into all sorts of worries?" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 179). Alcott argues through Uncle Alec that this part of a child's education is important, though much neglected.

The characters in *Eight Cousins* and *Jack and Jill* learn that health is a foundation for learning. They come to appreciate and value it. Putting health and physical activity at the center of the curriculum also highlights that Mrs. Minot and Uncle Alec understand the needs of their young charges.

Children Should be Allowed to Explore Their World Through Self-Directed, Active Learning

Dewey writes that "When a person is absorbed, the subject carries him on. Questions occur to him spontaneously; … the material holds and buoys his mind up and gives an onward impetus to thinking. A genuine enthusiasm is an attitude that operates as an intellectual force" (Dewey, 1964, p. 225). Alcott's characters demonstrate this over and over again. Because their schooling takes place outside of a classroom, they see and pursue learning opportunities everywhere.

Mac and Rose teach each other when they are on vacation in the mountains. Though neither of them has yet returned to school, they continue to find ways to learn.

> Mac…developed a geological mania, and went tapping about at rocks and stones, discoursing wisely of "strata, periods, and fossil remains'; while Rose picked up leaves and lichens, and gave him lessons in botany, in return for his lectures on geology. (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 119)

The children seem to be learning from observations only, building on what they already have learned in more formal environments. They see learning and teaching as a natural outgrowth of the exploration of their environment.

As much as Dewey emphasizes practical learning, he does not dismiss information gained from books entirely. He describes the book as "all-important in interpreting and expanding experience" (Dewey, 1959, p. 76). Books are sources of information to use to expand understanding of what the child has experienced. Alcott see this as well. In *Jack and Jill* when the family goes to the seashore, Frank insists on taking his two volume encyclopedia, which he has to carry because the books will not fit in the luggage. His mother has forbidden him to study during the trip, but he says

> "We shall want to know heaps of things, and this tells about everything. With those books, and a microscope and a telescope, you could travel round the world, and learn all you wanted to… I shall play as much as I wish, and when I want to know about any new or curious thing, I shall consult my Cyclo, instead of bothering other people with questions, or giving it up like a dunce."

> …Frank actually did take the Encyclopedia, done up in the roll of shawls, and whenever the others wondered about anything, – tides, light-houses, towns, or natural productions, – he brought forth one of the books and triumphantly read therefrom, to the great merriment, if not edification, of his party. (Alcott, 1880/1999, pp. 238–240)

Here Alcott pokes gentle fun at Frank's need to understand about "new and curious things." But she also shows his eagerness to learn cannot be quenched, and that books can be an important source of knowledge, along with practical experience.

Rose also shows an eagerness to learn when Aunt Myra walks in on her physiology lesson. Rose has been looking at and manipulating a real skeleton, which frightens the aunt. But Rose thoroughly enjoys the chance to interact with the material she is learning. She is bursting with new information, which she is eager to share:

> Just think, there are 600,000,000 air cells in one pair of lungs, and 2,000 pores to a square inch of surface; so you see what quantities of air we must have, and what care we should take of our skin so all the little doors will open and shut right. And brains, auntie, you've no idea how curious they are; I haven't got to them yet, but I long to, and uncle is going to show me a manikin that you can take to pieces. Just think how nice it will be to see all the organs in their places; I only wish they could be made to work as ours do. (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 176)

She probably would not be as excited if Uncle Alec had just lectured. Alcott perfectly captures the way children react to learning when it comes naturally,[2] something Dewey is also aware of. He writes, "When a person is absorbed… further inquiries and readings are indicated and followed" (Dewey 1964, p. 225). Enthusiasm for a subject leads to further learning.

Another area of study for these children is history. Here, again, Alcott presents a very different way of learning. Her characters do not memorize names, dates, and events. In fact, the girls in *Jack and Jill* refer to the incomplete knowledge they gained in school, where memorizing facts was the only aim. Mrs. Minot has taught Jill, Molly, and Merry a lesson on English history. During the lesson, the girls have been sewing. This is not an entirely auditory lesson, though. "[A]n illustrated Shakespeare lay open on the table, as well as several fine photographs of historical places," and the lesson is presented as a story, not a list of facts (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 279).

After the lesson the girls discuss what they have learned, and Merry says "Now I've seen where they lived and heard their stories, I quite feel as if I knew them" (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 279). The girls feel that they have a deeper understanding of facts they should have already learned, but they also now see connections to their own lives (what educators call a self-to-text connection):

[2] Reading Rose's speech aloud emphasizes how perfectly Alcott has captured the voice of an excited child.

> "I used to think I'd like to be a queen or a great lady, and wear velvet and jewels, and live in a palace, but now I don't care much for that sort of splendor. I like to make things pretty at home, and know that they all depend on me, and love me very much. Queens are not happy, and I am," said Merry. (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 280)

There is no time for this kind of discussion in the traditional classroom, but in the relaxed home environment there is plenty of time. The girls were able to ask questions during the lesson; then when the lesson is over, Alcott shows them processing what they have learned. The processing is more important than the facts of the lesson, though Alcott makes it clear that the girls have learned the information. They also compare it to previous lessons on the same material. Because Alcott does not include the lesson itself, what the reader is given is the children's view of the lesson, not the teacher's. Alcott is thus able to present what the girls have learned and absorbed from the lesson.

In *Eight Cousins*, Alcott presents a living history lesson. Uncle Alec takes Rose to Uncle Mac's warehouse, where she meets a Chinese man named Fun, and listens to the men talk about business. At the end of the day, her Aunt Jane stops by, and says that Rose has probably wasted her day, while her boys have been studying hard. Rose says she has had five lessons that day: "navigation, geography, grammar, arithmetic, and keeping my temper" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 74). Rose then gives Jane a long list of things she learned about China: the best teas, the meaning of China's city names, principal exports, and ends with stating that "in Canton is the Dwelling of the Holy Pigs, 14 of them, very big, and all blind" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 75). (This is the way children learn when they are not told what to memorize. They will learn useful information, but they also remember a crazy fact.) Rose was not told what to learn; she was interested because of the environment she was in, and because she was surrounded by artifacts that made the topic come alive.

Rose has also learned history through reading. When Mac is first recovering from heatstroke, Rose becomes his nurse because she has the time and patience for the task. She spends most of her time reading to him. He likes "travels, biographies, and history of great inventions or discoveries. Rose despised this taste at first, but soon got interested" (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 98). Mac's book choices teach Rose about history.

Rose's final major area of study is household arts. As she begins to take control over her learning, she decides that her learning should have a purpose. Though she has a large inheritance, she wishes to learn a trade so that she will be able to support herself if necessary. Uncle Alec suggests that Rose take cooking and house management classes from Aunt Plenty. Rose then asks if Aunt Peace can teach her sewing. Rose's wish to learn something useful leads Uncle Alec to create an entire curriculum, taught by experts. These lessons could be framed just in terms of learning a skill, but Alcott calls housekeeping an accomplishment; it is not just a matter of doing "women's work." It is important and worthy of attention.

One part of the curriculum is bread-baking. Alcott frames her description of Rose learning to make "the perfect loaf" in academic terms:

> It was some time before the perfect loaf appeared, for bread-making is an art not easily learned, and Aunt Plenty was very thorough in her teaching; so Rose studied yeast first, and through various stages of cake and biscuit came at last to the crowning glory of the "handsome, wholesome loaf." (Alcott, 1874/1996, p. 149)

Rose is not just learning to follow a recipe, she is learning about ingredients and methods, and some basic chemistry. Alcott presents Aunt Peace and Aunt Plenty as women who have important knowledge to pass on. Dewey, in "School Conditions and the Training of Thought" could be writing about the two aunts when he writes:

> Because their knowledge has been achieved in connection with the needs of specific situations, men of little book-learning are often able to put to effective use every ounce of knowledge they possess; while men of vast erudition are often swamped by the mere bulk of their learning, because memory, rather than thinking, has been operative in obtaining it. (Dewey, 1964, p. 237)

Dewey had his students building clubhouses and sewing in order to learn math, reading, and other academic subjects. Alcott does not explicitly say it, but anyone who bakes or sews knows how much math is learned along with the practical skills. Rose is continually learning as she bakes, cleans, and sews, and is fully engaged because she chose the topics in the first place.

Dewey, in arguing for "the household arts" such as sewing and cooking to be included in the schools, says that these arts are "methods of living and learning" (Dewey, 1959, p. 11). With these skills taught in the classroom, he argues, "the school itself shall be made a genuine form of active community life" (Dewey, 1959, p. 11). Alcott's depiction of Rose learning to bake bread parallels Dewey's description of how his students learn to weave. Dewey describes giving children "the raw material—the flax, the cotton plant, the wool as it comes from the back of the sheep" (Dewey, 1959, p. 18), and then leading the children in the discovery of how thread is created from the material, and how fabric is created from thread (Dewey, 1959, pp. 18–19). Dewey sees this as a history lesson, as the children re-discover the need for technological innovations. Alcott does not have Rose re-discover wild yeast, but Aunt Plenty's lessons do follow a set sequence designed to explain the need for each step in bread baking, so that Rose will fully understand what she is learning.

Conclusion

If the reader is to believe Alcott when she says she is just entertaining the young folk, as she says in the preface to *Eight Cousins*, then perhaps it is not her educational philosophy that is present in her fiction, rather it is the educational philosophy of the children of Concord. Jack, when presented with the choice of studying at home or going to school, voices the common complaint: "I don't see the sense of making a fellow learn eighty questions in geography 1 day, and forget them the next" (Alcott, 1880/1999, p. 267). Alcott's focus on the child's view of the

world, and the insight she has on the nature of that view, allows her to describe a mode of education that would not become a true reality in her lifetime. Dewey's education model, coming years later, would also build from children's natural inclinations and world view.

Alcott and Dewey believe that education should start with the child. A child who has been taught that education is a series of memorized lists will joyfully toss aside the school books at the first opportunity. A child who has been taught that the purpose of education is knowledge will engage in self-directed learning. Dewey says it needs to start from the child's own experience. Alcott, I think, would say it starts from the child's curiosity. Both acknowledge that learning is most meaningful when it has a direct connection to the child's daily life. Understanding children and how they learn leads to the creation of child-centered education, as Alcott reminds us in *Jack and Jill* and *Eight Cousins*. Her insight into childhood is a large part of why her work has lasted. Children can still see themselves in the stories, and adults can still share in Alcott's observations, and rediscover the child's world.

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