



Research Paper

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Views on Education

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ABSTRACT

Ralph Waldo Emerson once claimed, "We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years, and come out at last with a belly full of words and do not know a thing. The things taught in schools and colleges are not an education, but the means of an education" (qtd. in Williamson 381). This article critically evaluates Emerson's philosophy on education who believed that education should be nonconformist and individualistic.

KEYWORDS: Education, Learning, Teachers, Critical thinking, Self-reliance.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Emerson believed that teachers should not only convey knowledge to students, but it is their responsibility to create an environment that is favourable for learning, expressing and inventing new things out of their own interests. "He cannot indulge his genius, he cannot delight in personal creations with young friends, when his eye is always on the clock, and twenty classes are to be dealt with before his day is done" (qtd. in Williamson 383). Emerson believed that the method of teaching should be interesting not only for students, but for teachers as well. A vital point that Emerson makes is that if students are disinterested in the topic being taught, they will not pay any attention to the subject matter. Hence he promoted a philosophy of teaching that is based on cooperative learning. Therefore, Emerson believed that teachers should be tolerant and patient about the students' natural desires, and think about for innovative ideas to engage all students. Emerson in his writings made certain that the education of the students should not be restricted to classrooms, but should also be reflected in reality.

II. AIM OF THE STUDY

Emerson's primary focus was on individual integrity and self regeneration. Hence he held education as a means to bring forth the dormant faculties of the mind of man thereby helping him to be self reliant and individualistic. The aim of this paper is to bring forth the views of Emerson on education. Emerson considered education as the best means to reform. Emerson was himself a teacher in both city and country schools for four years and later he had served on the School Committee at Concord and on the Board of Overseers of Harvard College. He was also on other visiting committees, such as that for West Point. In other words, he remained a teacher all his life. Adapa Ramakrishna Rao in his *Emerson's Attitude Towards Humanitarian Reform* states:

Emerson made his strenuous lecture, tours not so much for the fees he earned thereby as to fulfill a need to teach and improve the American mind as much as he could. Emerson's ideas on education were non professional but they exerted profound influence on some great American educators such as Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard (the elective system), Horace Mann (Universal and Public Education), and John Dewey (Pragmatic approach to education). (172-3)

Edwin D. Meade considered Emerson's essay on education as "the most vital, pregnant and stimulating word upon general education which has been written by an American" (H. Gray 93). The views of Emerson and other Transcendentalists such as Alcott, Thoreau and Ripley on education were greatly influenced by the Swiss educator Pestalozzi. In *The Journals*, Emerson cited with approval, Pestalozzi's opinion that "the amelioration of outward circumstances will be the effect, but never can be the means of mental and moral improvement" (2: 416). This quotation sets the tone of Emerson's thoughts about education and the proper study of literature. Emerson believed that the proper reading of the poet should reveal to the individual reader his own subjective potentialities and his own kinship with what is great in mankind's traditional heroes and literary geniuses. For "past, present, future" are "triple blossoms from one root" (*Poems* 102), the eternal one or the over soul. The teaching technique based on the substitution of kindness for punishment, adopted by Alcott and Thoreau was also in accordance with the practices of Pestalozzi. Emerson often spoke on the subject of education and his essay on "Education" was made up from materials used in several lectures in school or college gatherings. Emerson's basic view on education is that, it is a means to the development of self-reliant individualism. Let us examine his views on education in relation to reform.

Emerson in his essay "Education" refers to the importance of education and how it enables man to achieve victory over many things and thus progresses in his life. He says that the world is a man's teacher. The household is a school of power where he learns human passions and the tragic-comedy of life. He tells that every object in Nature has the power to unlock the hidden and dormant faculties of the mind. The objects of nature impart knowledge to man. Education should enable man to learn the symbolical character of life and make him realize that a fact is an epiphany of God. In *The Complete Works*, he quotes with approval the statement that Leibnitz made: "I have hope that society may be reformed when I see how much education may be reformed". Emerson suggests: "education should be as broad as man. Whatever elements are in him that [Education] should foster and demonstrate"(10: 134). He deplors the state of contemporary education that aims man to be mere accountants, attorneys and engineers but has failed to make them able, earnest, honest and great hearted men. He says in his essay "Education" that:

The great object of education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be moral one; to teach self-trust; to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself; with a curiosity touching his own nature; to acquaint him with the resources of his mind, and to teach him that there is all his strength, and to inflame him with a piety towards the Grand Mind in which he lives. Thus would education conspire with the Divine Providence. (10: 135)

Education must teach man to trust himself, differentiate between his higher and lower thoughts, teach him to make his timid faculties into a robust one and train him to be self-reliant. Education as the highest source of reform is found in the above passage. He conceived education not as gathering knowledge of the world but it should reveal man's inner strength and develop self reliance. Education must enable man to develop his potential intellectual faculties thus making him self-reliant. Only then can he reform himself and enjoy his individuality. Education, hence will reform man not through outward aid but by developing his innate faculties. Emerson emphasizes the fact that if a man is to realize his inward strength, he should be given the right of individuality and not be counted as one among a group. Emerson applies his doctrine of individualism to the education of children and suggests that all children should be given freedom to develop their personality. He observes: "I suffer whenever I see that common sight of a parent or senior imposing his opinion and way of thinking and being on a young soul to which they are totally unfit . . . You are trying to make that man another you. One's enough" (10: 137-38). Hence, Emerson suggests that the secret of successful education lies in respecting the pupil and not imposing one's will and thoughts on him. Hence, a teacher must encourage whatever is best for the pupil, rather than interfere and try to shape and mould his faculties which may probably head in the wrong direction. The true end of education is opening and feeding the human mind and Emerson is against the imposition of a rigid and inflexible curriculum which does not serve the true end.

In the later part of his essay on "Education", Emerson lays more emphasis on the need to teach each person as individual. He observes: "Our modes of education aim to expedite, to save labor, to do for masses what cannot be done for masses, what must be done reverently one by one; say rather, the whole world is needed for the tuition of each pupil" (10: 153-154). Then, raising the question of specific reforms in the field of education, Emerson asserts that the present difficulties and perplexities will solve themselves "when we leave institutions and address individuals" (10: 157). Emerson viewed education not as mere bookish knowledge but as the recognition and development of a child's own potentialities. Education should be imparted in such a way that each child is treated as an individual and encouraged to nurture his innate abilities. Hence, Emerson viewed education as the most effective mode of reform fostering self-trust and self-reliance.

Emerson's pragmatism in his ideas on education has been discussed by Professor Frederic Carpenter. Professor Carpenter observes that the most pragmatic of Emerson's ideas on education what may be called education by experience, was first expounded in the chapter on 'Discipline' in "Nature". Emerson held that all our daily experiences in nature, "give us sincerest lessons, whose meaning is unlimited. They educate both the Understanding and the Reason" (1: 36). Education begins in the nursery and not in school and should continue throughout our adult years. In his "American Scholar" he attacked the American college as "a hospital for decayed tutors" (Cabot 780) where dead books in dead languages were taught in a dead system. He believed that the object of education should be to remove all obstruction and let this natural force have free play and exhibit its peculiar product. From these ideals evolved the educational practices of Charles W. Eliot, especially the Harvard System of free electives. Eliot (who became President of the Chief American Education Institution in 1869) was faced with the growing American questioning of the time-honored value of the ancient classics. The idea of the Elective System was not to abolish the study of the classics but to let them compete freely with other studies.

III. CONCLUSION

Emerson believed that betterment and reform of an individual can come only through the efforts and achievements of the individual himself and not through the legislative or philanthropic measures. This idea of Emerson pervades the entire body of his writings. He believed in the possibility of the progress and advancement of the individual but doubted and was not convinced with the progress of the species. Hence, reform to be effective and productive should be directed at the individual and not collectively at masses. Improvement can come only through self-regeneration and self-reformation. It is an aid to the process of self-reform and progress through individual integrity that Emerson valued education so immensely. In the words of Mr. Hazen Carpenter:

Emerson . . . believed that a program of education guided by wider and wiser ideals will enable a man to reform himself, to build an enlightened self-reliant individual who will feel no need of external restraints. Reform of the human race is to come from within, through education of the individual. (23)

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