

The Evolution of Boarding Schools

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Boarding schools today are often thought of as hubs for the children of the wealthy and elite of society who are on a fast track for Ivy-League universities. While there may be truth to some stereotypes of boarding school education and an over exaggeration of others, boarding school is a unique culture and experience for those who take part. Boarding schools have existed for centuries and draw upon age-old ideas of education and tradition. Boarding schools have evolved from their simple beginnings of learning in the home of another to the multi-million-dollar enterprises they are today with sprawling campuses and state-of-the-art facilities, yet with similar goals of education remaining intact. For women particularly, boarding schools have undergone a transformational change in the intent, conditions, and curriculum of education from the nineteenth century to modern-day. Boarding schools have had an impact on educational society to such an extent that they have influenced and appeared in the literary works of several authors, like Jane Austen in her novel *Emma*, where she exposes the lifestyle of female boarding school in nineteenth century England through the character of Harriet Smith and the descriptions of Mrs. Goddard's school.

Boarding schools in the United Kingdom have been around for centuries. Some of their earliest beginnings can be traced back to the fifteenth century or prior. Often these earliest boarding schools were in association with a local church. At these schools, boys were educated in theology and Latin in order that they would become priests or other members of the church (Kashti, 1988). As time progressed, the number of boarding schools in the UK increased. During the Reformation, the number of boarding schools also increased substantially as "they became an integral part of the effort to spread Protestantism, or to renew the strength and hold of the old religion" (Kashti, 1988, p. 351). Initially, the creation of these schools was not for the upper class but for the lower classes of society. Gradually, however, as the years progressed and society changed, paying students replaced the poor students at these boarding schools, and by the eighteenth century most of those enrolled in boarding schools were members of the middle to upper class. With the desire to educate their daughters, especially for middle class and merchant families, education for women began to grow. Girls' education began in the home, and boarding schools for women soon followed. In the United States, boarding schools had a different beginning. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the established upper class elite families of the Northeast sought to and created boarding schools as a means of isolating their children from the lower classes, immigrants, and those of the upper class who earned their money, known as the *nouveaux riches*. Isolation from the lesser peoples of society ensured that the children of the elite would be separated from the "contaminating aspects of city life, including the dangerous habits and ideas of working-class children whom they were likely to meet on their way to and from school" (Levine, 1980, p. 72). These schools ensured that only the upper class would be surrounded by those of the upper class. Some boarding schools, like The Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut, and The Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, were created by the presidents of Yale and Princeton to safeguard and supply a steady stream of upper-class students into their universities (Levine, 1980). At their founding, most of these boarding schools were not co-educational and were strictly for the sons of the Northeast elite. There were some female only boarding schools, like Miss Porter's School, that sought to educate women. However, many of these schools were strictly for white upper-class girls of the elite, and many girls were denied on the aspects of race, religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Entering the nineteenth century, boarding schools in both the UK and US were in operation with a purpose of educating a select group of society.

In the nineteenth century especially, boarding schools for women in the UK became increasingly popular. Those of the upper-class and gentry were most often educated in the home by a governess. The upper-middle class may have also used a governess, if one could be afforded. Most commonly, though, members of the middle class chose to send their daughters to boarding schools. Girls were often sent to boarding schools for a period of one to two years to be “finished,” and boarding school was often seen as the transitory period into adulthood (McDermid, 2012; Gorham, 2013). Some girls remained at these schools for longer than a period of one to two years. Often, these girls sent away for a longer period may have been orphaned, unwanted by their families, or deemed unmanageable by their families. Some girls were also sent away because they were not capable of remaining in the home for various circumstances. Like many schools, the quality of the education and living conditions varied widely depending on the institution. Education at these schools were solely focused on the teaching of accomplishments that a nineteenth century woman ought to have. Accomplished women were proficient in English, French, dance, music, needlework, piano, drawing, and other skills that made them of a higher marriageable quality in society. Basic education for women included instruction in English, French, some geography, history, and literature. Other skills, often within the arts, were deemed as “extras.” These “extras” that helped define an accomplished woman, like drawing, singing, piano, music, needlework, etc., could be taught for an additional cost (Gorham, 2013).

What was absent from the education of females at this time was any instruction in the classical languages, Latin and Greek, and mathematics. These subjects were reserved for the education of males only. Fear existed amongst the teachers of over-educating the women. Too much education would make a women appear more “masculine” and thus not of marriageable quality (McDermid, 2012). Pricing for these institutions also varied widely, from prices that the lower-middle-class could comfortably afford to prices that were only attainable by those of the upper-middle-class and beyond. Prices also varied by the addition of the “extras” or not. Depending upon the individual choices by the families, the education of their teenage daughters varied in curriculum, quality, and price.

The nineteenth century English author, Jane Austen, attended boarding school. Jane Austen attended Reading Ladies’ Boarding School in Reading alongside her sister Cassandra from 1785 to 1786. At Reading Ladies’ Boarding School, Austen and her sister were parlor boarders. Parlor boarders were the privileged pupils at these boarding schools who had access to the principal or headmistress’s parlor for tea and supper. Parlor boarders may have also resided in the principal’s house or had a bed and room of their own instead of sharing with the other girls at the school (Cronin, 2005). For his daughter’s to be parlor boarders, Austen’s father paid £35 per year per daughter including the extras, as opposed to £16 per year per daughter for ordinary boarders (Corley, 1998). As her father paid for extras, Jane Austen was most likely taught English, French, handwriting, and some religious education like many of her peers, but additionally dance, music, piano, and more. The school year was divided up into twenty-week terms, and the girls would seldom visit home during this time. All evidence points to Reading Ladies’ Boarding School being of a high quality, and “there is no evidence that the Austen parents were dissatisfied with the pastoral or academic sides of the school” (Corley, 1998, p.122). The girls

remained in attendance at the school for a period of about eighteen months before they were downgraded from parlor boarders to ordinary boarders and then pulled from the school entirely due to the financial strain on Mr. Austen, Jane Austen's father. Jane Austen's father also took in several boys from the surrounding area and educated them in the Austen home, presumably to increase his annual income beyond that of a clergyman's salary (Collins, 1998).

Thus, before and after Jane Austen herself attended boarding school, she experienced boarding school in her own home. Her father, scholars have presumed, gave her full access to his library and continued to support her education at home after her boarding school experience. A reasonable assumption can be inferred that Jane Austen was most likely more educated than most women in her time.

Jane Austen in her novel, *Emma*, depicts the life of boarding school through Harriet Smith and Mrs. Goddard's School. Of Mrs. Goddard's School, Austen described it as such:

Mrs. Goddard was the mistress of a school—not of a seminary, or an establishment, or any thing which professed, in long sentences or refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality upon new principles and new systems—and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity—but a real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies. (Austen, 1815, p. 22)

Scholars have hypothesized that this description of Mrs. Goddard's school is based upon and similar to the Reading Ladies' Boarding School where Jane Austen attended. Her description of Mrs. Goddard's school is that of a typical boarding school in nineteenth century England including her own. Reading Ladies' Boarding School was considered very socially respectable, precisely like that of Mrs. Goddard's (Corley, 1998). Both schools were places, not outrageously expensive, though they could be depending on the number of accomplishments taught and the choice of being a parlor or ordinary boarder, and a place where women could receive some education. These schools were not meant to educate women in the way that the twenty-first century audience often thinks of education. Women were educated enough to be competent and to be a good wife and mother. They were taught what was necessary to be appealing to men and marriage worthy, but never were they educated to a standard of being equal with men. Too much education was unappealing and undesirable in a woman during the nineteenth century. It is reflected in Austen's description that they were to get a little education, but not too much that they were prodigies. Prodigies were not marriable women, and boarding school for women was designed so that they would be molded into the ideal woman and wife. A "real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school," as Jane Austen describes, encompassed educating women to be accomplished enough to stand out and be desired for by men, but not too accomplished that they were to stand out and be a threat to men or looked down upon because of their intelligence (Austen, 1815, p. 22). By twenty-first century and

Mr. Knightley's standards, Harriet Smith received a "very indifferent education" at Mrs. Goddard's school (Austen, 1815, p. 61). Another detail that Jane Austen includes is that Harriet Smith was a parlor boarder. Austen writes (1815), "Somebody had placed her [Harriet], several years back, at Mrs. Goddard's school, and somebody had lately raised her from the condition of scholar to that of a parlour-boarder" (Austen, 1815, p. 23). This detail of Harriet Smith reflects Austen's own experience at boarding school, as her father paid for her to be a parlor boarder at Reading Ladies' Boarding School. In her description and portrayal of Mrs. Goddard's, Austen incorporates details from her own educational experience as a young girl in boarding school.

Modern-day boarding schools for women have evolved much since the time of Jane Austen in nineteenth century England and the beginnings of US boarding school in the nineteenth century. Many modern-day boarding schools, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, have become co-educational institutions that allow boys and girls to study alongside one another in the classroom, though boys only or girls only options are still in existence. Additionally, at these institutions teachers are expected to behave in both formal settings inside of the classroom and informal ways outside of the classroom and within residential life. Many teachers at boarding schools live on campus with their students and interact with them in a professional manner and in an unofficial, colloquial manner. This was unlike the nineteenth century where strict formality and proper manners were always enforced (Kahane, 1988). The curriculum for women has also broadened. Women at boarding schools in the twenty-first century can take classes in mathematics, the biological and physical sciences, and the classical languages if they so choose, and they are educated in these subjects with males in co-educational institutions. Subjects once exclusively limited to males have become available for all. Women are also engaged in many different extracurricular activities in modern boarding schools. Girls often have the option of playing sports, whether volleyball, tennis, softball, swimming, etc., and it is typically highly encouraged. While nineteenth century women often engaged in some exercise to remain physically fit, it was not in the form of recreational sport. While women may choose to take part in the arts like music or drawing or painting, it is no longer, typically, a required part of curriculum for the sake of building one's accomplishment list, and men are often encouraged to participate in these same extracurricular activities. Boarding schools in the US and the UK are no longer just for the middle or upper-class of society. While diversity in terms of socioeconomic status is by no means perfect and still tends to favor the middle and upper class, boarding schools both in the US and the UK are working toward making their education available to any person who wants to attend through financial aid and scholarships. Most importantly, the intent behind the education for women at boarding schools has changed. In the nineteenth century, boarding school for women was considered finishing school because after completing their education at these schools their education was finished. They would no longer attend school and would enter the marriage market to look for a husband. Due to the outcome that was expected, the intent behind the boarding school education was to ensure that ladies be accomplished to be marriageable. Nowadays, the intent behind boarding school is no longer for women to be educated in the qualities that make her a desirable future wife. Education for women is now to create change, to better their future, better the world, and because they deserve the same education as men. Boarding

schools are no longer the end for women's education but often the launching point for women to pursue higher education at colleges and universities, a luxury that was not available to the women of Jane Austen's era. Boarding schools have become a powerful force for the education of all children to create better people and hopefully a better world through the experiences they have and the education they receive.

Boarding schools have undergone a transformation over the past several centuries in both the UK and the US. Boarding schools have evolved from educating the poor and preparing boys to become priests in the UK, and preserving the elite upper-class in the US, to trying to create a diverse community of students, both male and female, who seek a rich educational and residential experience during their adolescent years. Jane Austen includes boarding school in her novel *Emma* as a highlight of her own boarding school experience and a reflection of the culture and influence of boarding schools for young women in nineteenth century England. Boarding schools, just as they did in the nineteenth century, play a defining role in the modern-day education system. The boarding school experience is unique to those who attend and experience its culture firsthand, but the publication of novels by authors or the shared experiences of those who attended can shed light on an often-overlooked niche sector of the education system in the United Kingdom and United States.

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