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THE OPPORTUNITY AFFORDED BY THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE SCHOOL

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Education is not *preparation* for life, it *is* life, says Professor Dewey in his "Educational Creed." It is due to the conviction that this is true that many earnest teachers have, in recent years, given more and more attention to the general social life of their schools. They see quite clearly that preparation for life and living itself cannot be separated. The best preparation for the life of tomorrow is to live completely in today, meeting its opportunities to the fullest extent of one's ability.

This recognition that *education is life itself* carries with it the recognition that school-education cannot confine itself to the training of the mind or of the moral nature in isolation from the pupil's social relationships. It must train the *whole* child. There is no warrant for assuming that one phase of child-nature is any less in need of training than other aspects, or, specifically, that a child needs less training in his social relations than in his intellectual processes.

One of the popular current conceptions of the end of education is social efficiency, and yet with most teachers it is a mere verbalism, having no direct relation to the actual work of the school. The teacher is usually content to think that if he trains the boy in the ordinary school studies he is training him to be an efficient member of society. The penetrating observer, however, sees that this is not the case. The training for a socially efficient manhood or womanhood must include, at every step of the process, the *whole child* in all his relationships.

Our public school work today is being subjected to a rapid-fire criticism of a most searching order. Some of it is unintelligent and foolish, but some of it must be seriously faced. That a good deal of school work from the beginning to the end does not make vital contact with the child and with the youth is fairly evident. How else can be explained the fearful waste involved in retardation and in dropping out that prevails everywhere. We can scarcely say that all our over-age pupils, or those who drop by the wayside, are of inferior intelligence. Some of them are, no doubt, but for many the work of the

school is so abstract and unrelated to the interests of life that it fails to grip them in any impelling way.

To meet this situation is no easy matter. No one patent nostrum, no one royal road will be sufficient, and yet perhaps the most far-reaching remedy is to appreciate the fact that the *school is a social institution*, and to work this out consciously and systematically in our practice. This conception of the school, if realized, demands the doing of many things. It demands a curriculum that shall more definitely prepare for vocations, and that shall as a whole appeal to children as helping them to understand and act intelligently in the great world outside the school's walls. It demands also the recognition of the fact that the boys and girls within the school have a *social as well as an intellectual nature*. The first one of these demands we shall reserve for discussion on another occasion. The latter need, the recognition and the importance of the general social life of the pupils in the school, we shall consider here.

The systematic study and development of the social life of the school is necessary for two reasons: First, it is needed to render the strictly intellectual training more interesting, more vital and more effective. Secondly, it is needed because all boys and girls from a moral point of view, are quite as much in need of training in proper social relationships as in intellectual processes. In fact the two cannot be separated. In all normal growth both phases must be concurrent, each one will supplement the other.

Every school has a social life of some sort. People of any age, and especially of the high-school age, cannot be brought together day after day without developing manifold social relationships, without influencing each other in all sorts of ways for better or for worse. The question is whether this obvious tendency is to be officially recognized and used as an educational opportunity, or whether it is to be ignored or suppressed. If we imagine we can take either of these latter courses, we deceive ourselves. To attempt it is to run the risk of transforming a precious educational opportunity into an occasion for almost any amount of harm to the youth.

The attitude of school men and women has passed through several well-marked stages. First there was the spontaneous, uncontrolled social life of the pupils, existing but ignored, or energetically suppressed. Then the idea came that these social activities should be controlled so that they might not interfere

with the primary and legitimate functions of the school. They were looked upon as evils, but as necessary evils to be curbed. This is about as far as most school administrators have gone. In some quarters, however, the conviction is assuming definite shape that this social life must not only be controlled but also that it is part of the function of public education to develop it, *and make of it a positive, moral force in the work of educating boys and girls.*

Let us first of all try to get a clear conception of the nature and character-forming influence of the spontaneous social tendencies of children. We must carefully define our problem. We do not here have in mind the obvious and important fact that every child is from birth surrounded by people, and that the whole course of his mental development is determined by his human associations. This sort of social influence exists for all ages and circumstances of life, for little children as well as for older ones. We have in mind rather the sociable, group-forming tendencies which are not apparent in the earlier years, but which gradually appear, quite spontaneously, and become more and more marked as childhood turns into youth.

These early groupings are but the fore-shadowing of those elementary forms of social life which lie at the basis of all human society. They have been aptly called "primary groups" and may be most readily illustrated by the associations involved in the family, the neighborhood, the playground, and all sorts of social and fraternal and religious organizations. These are the units out of which is built the larger whole of society. They are primary, as Cooley says,* because they are essentially the same the world over, notwithstanding differences in race, in nationality or in form of government. They are also primary because they are the "nurseries of human nature," they furnish the conditions in which the child gets his first experiences of human nature, in which in fact, his own human nature is first formed and built up. They are not ideal in all respects, but they come nearer to being ideal than any of the larger and more loosely-knit social groups such as cities, states, or nations. The intimate fact-to-face association which necessarily exists within these little groups gives the child his first experience in social unity or "oneness" with his fellows. Still following Cooley's admirable discussion, we may say that this sense is the mother

**Social Organization*, Chapter III.

of all social and hence of all human virtues, for social solidarity can exist only as it is supported by a certain sense of loyalty, a certain regard for lawfulness, and a due respect for individual freedom. To be loyal to one's group means that one must be truthful to one's fellows: he must be ready to serve them even against his own individual interest, nor can he be loyal to his group except as he experiences more or less kindly regard for its other members. These are fundamental human virtues which one is not born with and which one cannot acquire except through fellowship in a "primary group."

We need not pause here to give illustrations of the reality of primary-group virtues. Every family, if it is in truth a family, every neighborhood and playground will furnish evidence to him who takes the pains to look. No boys' or girls' club or even the worst gang could hold together for a moment except as its members have some sense of commonality, some regard for law, for fair dealing, for kindness among themselves. These fine qualities within the group may be coupled with much that is unlovely, especially in the group's treatment of those who are without its pale, *but they furnish the basis, the raw material, for all possible improvements in the relations of men and women whether on a small or on a large scale.*

When we reflect that these group-forming tendencies are strong in children, especially as they approach the high-school age, we can see what an immense educational opportunity they afford for the realization of moral culture. The school has tended to deal with its children as individuals, when they are in reality social beings. It has tried to train them as individuals in the virtues of truthfulness, justice, loyalty, fair-play, and lawfulness. As abstract statements these terms mean nothing to children; but when illustrated by intimate associations of the playground, gang, club, or school itself, they stand out with convincing force. It is not so necessary, however, as a first step, that children shall have these desirable qualities of conduct pointed out to them; it is far more essential that they shall have abundant opportunity of actually experiencing them in association with one another under the wise but not too officious supervision of parents and teachers.

Every school which sets up moral character as one of its ideals must recognize and encourage the group-forming instincts of its children through which they will learn much that will make them well-rounded men and women.

The social life of the school has naturally several phases which must be recognized by the teacher who wishes to make it a valuable educational asset. In the first place, there is the school as a whole which is itself a "primary group." If the school is too large for an ideal social group, it can easily be sub-divided into natural groups of rooms and classes. In the next place, there are in even small schools the still smaller groups or clubs which are knit together by some common though temporary interest. The training in social relationships *must center if possible about the school as a whole*. The sense of "our school" should be built up and nurtured in various ways as an important basis for co-operative undertakings and as a means of developing in all the children a sense of loyalty and lawfulness, all so needful in adult society. The morning assembly, the entertainment, the public exhibition of the school's work, and best of all the festival, varying with the season of the year, a co-operative activity in which each individual group in the whole school may participate in varying ways—all these are today increasingly utilized in progressive schools as educative agencies of a higher order.

The school or room unit will naturally differentiate into various subordinate units which will provide for more intimate association and for the fuller satisfaction of kindred interests. Thus every school tends to have its athletic, literary, camera, and dramatic club, its debating societies, its band, orchestra, and chorus, and many others, according to the size and make-up of the student body. All such subordinate organizations may be "primary groups" of the greatest value to the pupils. They afford abundant opportunity for practical experience in the social virtues described above. It is, however, of the utmost importance that all such clubs should feel themselves but parts of "their school" and should feel that their special opportunity to follow their own interests does not give them the right to act selfishly or without public spirit. Their interests are but differentiations of the general school interests and they constantly owe it to the school to bring back to it some contribution of their own. They must feel that all are interested in what they in the separate groups are doing and that all have a right to participate in their accomplishment. Whatever they do, they do not only for their own satisfaction but because it contributes to the honor and efficiency of the school.

We must not forget the parties and social functions of the school and of the classes as a further means of social and moral training. To deal practically with this phase as well as with all the preceding aspects of social life in the school demands a clear recognition of the needs involved.

On the negative side, there is need of control because of the almost certain tendency of boys and girls in their teens to go in excess in social matters. To control does not mean to depreciate but to see to it that the social life shall be beneficial by making it well-balanced.

On the positive side there are two particular aspects.

First, the general need that *all* boys and girls shall have *fair* opportunity for training in social relationships; that some shall not be thrust to one side and a few monopolize all the advantages. This is most apt to occur where there are not definite attempts on the part of the school authorities to supervise and actually to develop it. The ones who are least in need of some phases of the training are most likely to get it all. They will even tend to exploit the whole school for their own selfish benefit. There are always a large number of backward, self-conscious boys and girls who need to be brought out and given opportunity to participate in the school's social pleasures and activities. They need it, not merely that they may enjoy their high-school life fully, but also that they may be well-rounded and socially efficient men and women.

In the second place, all these high school youths, and particularly the aggressive ones, need training in social co-operation and in social unselfishness. Group life, a social consciousness of some sort, is, as we have seen, inevitable. It is also natural and inevitable that these adolescents should experience a genuine desire to find themselves in a larger life of some sort. They crave a larger life than the merely personal. They are eager to live in some sort of atmosphere of social regard and social appreciation. They experience the utmost readiness to sacrifice narrow personal interests for the good of the group to which they feel themselves to be vitally related. These adolescent impulses are perfectly normal phases of human development. There is nothing about the youth that is finer or of more ultimate worth to him as a man than just these desires. They may, however, fail utterly to bear good fruit if left to work themselves out undirected. The greatest danger is that they may find expression only in a narrow group and that the larger

welfare of the school be ignored. The trouble with most adult life is not that it is *unsocial*, but that it is social in only limited relations and within narrow groups of people. We are most of us, for instance, loyal enough to our friends or to our narrow social circle, but we have not learned to use this loyalty in any large way. Kindliness, truthfulness, honesty, lawfulness and justice are fairly common traits of human nature in respect to a small circle of friends with mutual interests. But if they are ever to play any part in the larger circle of life in the city, in the state, in the nation, this must be achieved through education.

The need, thus stated, may be summarized briefly thus: All normal boys and girls, whatever their vocations in later life, will necessarily be thrown into contact with other people. They must know how to live and work with them if they are to be happy and efficient. They must know how to talk freely and without affectation. They must know how to persuade others, and how to yield to persuasion graciously. They must clearly appreciate the rights of others; they must be able to merge their own narrow interests in that which is for the interest of society as a whole. They must learn that a moral and a happy life is to be attained only through submitting to the restrictions and conventions of society; that these conventions of social life are to be submitted to gladly because they are safeguards to their own personal well-being as well as to that of others.

One high school principal states the need for attention to the social life of the pupils in this way*: "The school must provide for the activities suited to high school ages. It must furnish an education for initiative in enterprises, for development in natural leadership, for the genius of organization, for the growth of individual talents, for the meeting and solving of difficulties which come from a clash of interests, for the fostering of courtesy and dignity of manner, and last but not least in importance, a training in social conventions, without which a boy or girl meets life with a serious handicap." With these needs in mind, he set out to enlarge and vitalize the usual club activities in a high school of about four hundred. They had "had experiences with the fraternity, the excess of dance and party," and had felt the "lack of solidarity in the school which puts the interests

*Principal C. B. McLinn, of New Albany, Ind. See Boston Journal of Education, vol. LXXIV, p. 345 f.

of the school above all outside interests of club or clique." Open organizations were "increased to twenty or more, with the social feature prominent in most of them." Open meetings with printed invitations and refreshments at the close of the programme were held. "The control of these affairs presented the first problem. At the first meeting (of one of the clubs) the boys drank all the lemonade and at the next one they pocketed the fudge and threw salted peanuts at the girls. The teachers in charge were in despair. We determined on a concerted action to create a spirit in the school against that sort of rowdyism. Frank talks to groups and to individuals, an effort to awaken a desire to appear well, discussion in class-rooms, expression in the school proper of student disapproval of bad manners, have borne fruit and abundantly. The sentiment is strong for gentility and quiet behavior, and the popularity of the societies is also increasing."

The experience of this principal is quoted at length because it is typical of a new attitude that is developing among high-school administrators. What is here given could be duplicated from the reports which the writer has gathered from other high schools in different parts of the country. In dwelling at such length upon the educational and moral value of the general social life of the school, we must not lose our perspective. This is only one part of the school's work and it must not be developed to excess. It must not be allowed to take the attention of the pupils to such an extent that it detracts from the serious business of study. There is no need that it should in a school where the officers and teachers have a suitable sense of proportion. Everywhere there is need for the "golden mean." Just because there is danger of excessive attention of "outside-of-class activities" is no reason, however, for ignoring the social life which is bound to be present, or for trying to suppress it.