

PUBLIC SCHOOLS AS SOCIAL CENTRES

The belief appears to be gaining currency among students of education and among social workers and other observers of influences which affect human character, that many of the defects which characterize our social and industrial institutions, and many of the defects which so mar human character itself, are traceable to a mistaken concept as to what should be sought in life, implanted in us by our teachers and until recently emphasized quite universally in our educational systems. The schools of the past, and most of those of to-day, have devoted themselves to the task of giving children such knowledge as would enable them to engage successfully in the customary vocations, and personal success has been the goal ever held before the youthful mind.

Until recently it appears to have escaped public notice that this constant emphasis upon the importance of personal success, unless safeguarded by suitable ethical training, tends subtly to the development of selfish propensities that lead the individual to disregard or subordinate the interests of others, in the furtherance of personal ends; and that lead to unsocial attitudes, and to unfriendly rivalries and ill-feelings, and to wrong-doings of every kind. The constant encouragement given to personal ambition for personal triumph and personal reward tends to develop a desire similar to that possessed by the criminal offender who, in seeking his personal gratification, gives no proper regard or consideration to the relation of his acts or of his course to the welfare of others or to the welfare of the community.

To the desire for personal advantage or gratification, regardless of the welfare of others or regardless of the welfare of the social whole, nearly all, and perhaps all, evil is due; and for the development of this desire, in the form of purely self-centred ambitions, the teachers of children, whether in the schools, the homes, or the streets, have been in large measure responsible. The development of interest in one another is perhaps as important as the development of interest in self, if greed and injustice are to be prevented and if justice and fair-dealing are to prevail. It has become evident that the impor-

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tance of developing the social nature of the child has been insufficiently considered. The development of selfish tendencies must be forestalled and prevented by the awakening of social interests, and of the spirit of fairness and right; and through awakening recognition on the part of each of the consideration due his neighbor. The development of these desirable attributes and attitudes can be furthered by developing wider friendships, and through the wider sharing of common pleasures, joys and occupations. As wholesome common interests arise, the social nature develops, and with it the spirit of fair-play and equity. When we enjoy things together, or co-operate gladly with one another, we, for the time being, share similar thoughts and emotions, and the more often we share similar thoughts and emotions the more unified in thought and feeling we become. As common interests arise and as the social nature awakens, the individual becomes unwilling to take unfair advantage of his neighbor, and personal ambitions become so developed or readjusted as to be conformable to the public welfare, and as to conduce to harmony and progress. It is when we think and feel by and for ourselves alone that injustice spreads, and with it the ill-feeling and bitterness that separate people from one another, and that develop group antagonisms that spread discord and disorder.

The opportunities which the public schools can provide for the awakening of social instincts and social interests, and for the arousing of social spirit and for the laying of foundations for healthy social relations, are so vast that in the leading cities of the country movements are already well advanced looking to the extension of the functions of the schools until they become educational institutions in a far broader sense than hitherto. The development of the social nature is no less important than the development of the intellectual faculties. Education of the head, in disregard of the moral or social sense, leads to the grossest crimes and to the most far-reaching injustice. There is, perhaps, no other form of immorality more disastrous in its effects upon the individual and upon the community than intellectual selfishness. Nearly every evil of which society and the individual are victims is traceable directly or indirectly to selfish acts that the mere intellect of the offender excuses. Intellect divorced from the social nature is a dangerous tool. "The mind,

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swayed by rambling passions, makes the soul as helpless as the boat which the wind leads astray upon the waters" (Bhagavad Gita II.). The social nature must be so developed as to avail of the mind for the furtherance of human welfare, and must not be driven backward by it.

Criminality has been instanced as a far too prevalent consequence of selfish desire, of desire for satisfaction or gratification regardless of the injuries entailed. Poverty is in large measure due to sickness or vicious habits, but in still larger measure to inequitable industrial conditions that have been brought about through the exercise of self-centred desires for personal wealth, regardless of the interests or of the welfare of many of those engaged in its production. Vice and vicious habits are but products of self-centred desires for immediate gratification, regardless of consequences whether to self or to others. Sickness can be traced in most cases either to unsanitary or otherwise defective environment, or to needlessly impoverished constitution, the latter being consequent either upon the environment or else upon ignorance of the laws of health and blind unhygienic striving for life and its gratification on the part of the individual or his progenitors. Even unhygienic environments are usually due to the selfishness of individuals, or to their indifference to the welfare of others. Individuals own the slums, and antagonize remedial legislation designed to secure better tenement conditions or to eliminate centres of physical or moral foulness and infection. It is individuals who perpetuate evil conditions and permit other individuals to suffer and die for the sake of the profits to be derived by self from the continuance of the conditions.

The perpetuation of bad environments, and the development of defective constitutions, and the development of the human selfishness or indifference that is responsible for both, can obviously be prevented by the development, through school influences, and otherwise, of social instincts, and of regard on the part of each for his fellow, and by proper social co-operation in support of remedial sanitary and industrial measures, and of measures designed to eliminate from our educational systems, or to bring under adequate control, those influences in the schools which tend to make the individual self-centred and predominantly self-seeking. To live and to produce and to enjoy, in ways conformable to the public welfare and conducive to

human progress, should be the aim of the individual; and the realization should be awakened in each that it is only through the social life and through personal service to others that the highest welfare of the individual himself can be attained.

In the interest of ordinary morality it is desirable that the social instincts of the people be given adequate opportunity for expression in wholesome ways. It is natural for people to desire recreation and pleasure; some degree of recreation and pleasure is, perhaps, essential to health and to character; and it is natural for men and women and for boys and girls to desire to associate together. In many districts and communities opportunities for harmless enjoyment are few and far between. Where opportunities for decent pleasures cannot be found, indecent pleasures will be had. It is neither reasonable nor just to denounce vice and its victims where opportunities for wholesome enjoyment and for wholesome relations between boys and girls and between young men and young women are altogether lacking. If we would forestall the development of vicious habits and of the unsocial attitudes that lead to wrong-doing of every kind, we must see to it that opportunities are provided that shall make possible the enjoyment of a wholesome social life.

The movement looking to the use of schools as social centres for their neighborhoods is of but a few years' growth. The movement in New York started, or first received concrete expression, about seven years ago. In 1897 Miss Winifred Buck, of the University Settlement, secured permission to open some boys' clubs in Public School No. 20, and in organizing and supervising the experiment had the co-operation of a number of the members of one of the older boys' clubs of the Settlement. Two years later similar clubs were opened in Public School No. 160, and gradually the movement has spread to various parts of the city, until at present twenty-one of the public school buildings are open after school hours, under suitable restrictions and supervision, for the use of boys' and girls' clubs and for other forms of youthful social life or recreation. In 128 of the buildings last year, frequent informal lectures on popular topics, illustrated with stereopticon views, were given to adults in the evenings; and in several schools very successful concerts and musicales were given also. The popularity of these features—which were both recreational and educational in nature—is attested by the very

large number of people who availed of them. The aggregate attendance at the informal lectures last year amounted to 1,204,211.

In one of the larger school buildings (P. S. No. 147) accommodations were provided last year for seventy-six boys' and young men's clubs; thirty-six of these giving considerable time on meeting nights to literary exercises or to discussions of topics of interest, the remaining forty being organized for purposes of social fellowship in athletics. In Public School No. 160, twenty-five clubs were in session, and there the exceedingly interesting experiment was successfully tried of organizing one of the regular evening school classes into a club, the members meeting as a school class four nights in the week, and as a club for social purposes the fifth night. (That school and various others were open but five nights a week.) It is to be hoped that similar experiments will be tried elsewhere. For, after all, mere instruction in the elementary branches of learning constitutes but a poor and defective kind of education. The mere inculcation of fragmentary knowledge does not necessarily develop the qualities that lead to good citizenship or to useful life. For the members of a school class to organize as a club, to meet one evening each week for games or wholesome recreation of any kind, and for the development of closer intimacies and sympathies than the formalities of the classroom usually allow, and for the common enjoyment of the thousand and one interests that such clubs arouse—all this tends wholesomely to the development of the social nature and to the favorable development of character.

From the standpoint of mere economy it is desirable that the school buildings be not left idle and unused throughout the majority of the day. It was found in New York last year that the amount of time during which the school buildings were in use daily averaged less than five hours. The vast capital invested in lands, buildings and equipments for educational purposes, lay idle and unproductive during more than two-thirds of the time between eight in the morning and ten at night. And, meanwhile, the settlements and various club buildings in many parts of the city were overwhelmed with requests from organized and unorganized groups of people for the use of their rooms for social and recreational purposes, and for meetings to discuss matters of special local interest. The University Settlement alone, with sixty or more clubs and similar organizations in its building,

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was obliged last year to refuse requests from more than two hundred other groups for permission to use its rooms. The desire for social life, and for larger social relations, has arisen on every hand. Shall this desire be thwarted and discouraged and compelled to seek expression amid the demoralizing conditions that characterize cheap dance halls and saloons, or shall the school buildings that are idle and unused during the latter part of the afternoons and usually during the whole of the evenings, be made available after school hours for other social uses of the people?

It has been said that the structural arrangements in a school building are such as to render it, as a rule, unsuited for ordinary social uses. The desks and chairs are screwed to the floor, ugly blackboards cover much of the walls, furniture cannot easily be introduced that will be suitable for both school and informal social purposes. Doubtless the equipment of many schools is not of a kind to render the school-rooms convenient for any other than mere classroom use. But in other schools (and in some of the best and most successful) desks and chairs are being introduced of such patterns that they can easily be removed—pushed or carried to one side by the pupils themselves—and the floor cleared for games, or the seats rearranged for lectures, concerts or other forms of entertainment. Where floor space is very limited, and ordinary desks, even if moved to one side, occupy too much room to admit of large audiences or of convenient dancing or of such large gatherings as would sometimes be desired, the use of desks of the type devised by Colonel Parker, of the School of Education of Chicago, would often afford a simple way out of the difficulty. Desks of this type have flat tops (readily adjustable to any inclination desired) and broad bases, and suitable rubber-tired castors that permit sideways motion only; such desks can easily be placed one upon another, if necessary, in the rear of the room or elsewhere, out of the way. The pattern of much modern school furniture is so good that its retention in the class-room would seldom be found too objectionable, from the aesthetic standpoint, even though the desks were occasionally placed upon one another as suggested. Of course, for ordinary table games such as chess, cards, or many of the simple games that so delight children, the flat-top desk is as well suited as an ordinary small table. By combining the use of easily moved furniture with the use of the better types of

easily removed partitions, as is already done in numerous successful schools, a whole floor can be converted quickly and easily into a large assembly room. In many schools, one or more rooms could advantageously be set apart regularly, after school hours, for ordinary reading-room purposes, and supplied with newspapers, magazines and periodicals. The blackboard difficulty is easily overcome. Large sheets of ground glass affixed to the walls, the unground backs of the sheets painted any dark shade or tone desired, afford perfect substitutes for blackboards and are far more durable and no less serviceable. The judicious coloring of "blackboards" and walls, and the introduction of suitable pictures and inexpensive casts, and, perhaps, some plants or simple flowers, and the substitution of new for old type furniture, will make the rooms as attractive as ordinary social usage requires.

As school rooms become more attractive and as the school's functions broaden, and as the buildings become more largely social centres for their neighborhoods, the antagonisms so often existing between scholars and school diminish, and truancy lessens and the difficulty of interesting children in their school work becomes replaced by the far greater difficulty of providing adequate accommodations for all who eagerly seek admission. The modern school with its social features is eagerly sought both in winter and in summer, both for lessons and for play.

During the summer vacation last year it was no uncommon thing in one of the New York schools to see from 1,200 to 1,500 children swarming up six flights to the roof, in the evenings, to play their simple games there, or to dance to the simple music. And, frequently, mothers and fathers would trudge up the long stairs too, many of them carrying their babies, to watch the enjoyment of the children and to participate with them in their happiness. Surely it is a good thing when the parents and children of a neighborhood have opportunity to enjoy rest and recreation together. In the crowded districts, especially, such wholesome relations bring peace and happiness and good-will. The more widely such and similar opportunities are provided, the better will it be for the community, and for the harmony and welfare of all.

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