

The School as Social Center

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THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

OCTOBER, 1902

THE SCHOOL AS SOCIAL CENTER.¹

ACCORDING to the character of my invitation to speak to you, I shall confine myself to the philosophy of the school as a social center. I accept the invitation with pleasure, but at the same time I do not feel that the philosophical aspect of the matter is the urgent or important one. The pressing thing, the significant thing, is really to make the school a social center; that is a matter of practice, not of theory. Just what to do in order to make the schoolhouse a center of full and adequate social service, to bring it completely into the current of social life—such are the matters, I am sure, which really deserve the attention of the public and occupy your own minds.

It is possible, however, and conceivably useful to ask ourselves: What is the meaning of the popular demand in this direction? Why should the community in general, and those particularly interested in education in especial, be so unusually sensitive at just this period to this need? Why should the lack be more felt now than a generation ago? What forces are stirring that awaken such speedy and favorable response to the notion that the school, as a place of instruction for children, is not performing its full function—that it needs also to operate as a center of life for all ages and classes?

A brief historic retrospect will put before us the background of the present situation. The function of education, since anything which might pass by that name was found among savage tribes, has been social. The particular organ or structure, however, through which this aim was subserved, and the nature

¹ An address delivered before the National Council of Education, Minneapolis, Minn., July, 1902.

of its adjustment to other social institutions, have varied according to the peculiar condition of the given time. The general principle of evolution—development from the undifferentiated toward the formation of distinct organs through division of labor—stands out clearly in a survey of educational history. At the outset there was no school as a separate institution. The educative processes were carried on in the ordinary play of family and community life. As the ends to be reached by education became more numerous and remote, and the means employed more specialized, it was necessary, however, for society to develop a distinct institution. Only in this way could the special needs be adequately attended to. In this way developed the schools carried on by great philosophical organizations of antiquity—the Platonic, Stoic, Epicurean, etc.; then came schools as a phase of the work of the church. Finally, with the increasing separation of church and state, the latter asserted itself as the proper founder and supporter of educational institutions; and the modern type of public, or at least quasi-public, school developed. There are many who regard the transfer of this educational function from the church to the state as more than a matter for regret; they conceive of it as a move which, if persisted in, will result disastrously to the best and permanent interests of mankind. But I take it we are not called upon today to reckon with this class, large and important as it may be. I assume that practically all here are believers in the principle of state education—even if we should not find it entirely easy to justify our faith on logical or philosophical grounds. The reason for referring to this claiming by the state of the function of education is to indicate that it was a continuance of the policy of specialization or division of labor.

With the development of the state has come a certain distinction between state and society. As I use these terms, I mean by “state” the organization of the resources of community life through governmental machinery of legislation and administration. I mean by “society” the less definite and freer play of the forces of the community which goes on in the daily intercourse and contact of men in an endless variety of ways that

have nothing to do with politics or government or the state in any institutional sense. Now, the control of education by the state inevitably carried with it a certain segregation of the machinery of both school administration and instruction from the freer, more varied, and more flexible modes of social intercourse. So true is this that for a long time the school was occupied exclusively with but one function, the purveying of intellectual material to a certain number of selected minds. Even when the democratic impulse broke into the isolated department of the school, it did not effect a complete reconstruction, but only the addition of another element. This was preparation for citizenship. The meaning of this phrase, "preparation for citizenship," shows precisely what I have in mind by the difference between the school as an isolated thing related to the state alone, and the school as a thoroughly socialized affair in contact at all points with the flow of community life. Citizenship, to most minds, means a distinctly political thing. It is defined in terms of relation to the government, not to society in its broader aspects. To be able to vote intelligently, to take such share as might be in the conduct of public legislation and administration—that has been the significance of the term.

Now our community life has suddenly awakened; and in awakening it has found that governmental institutions and affairs represent only a small part of the important purposes and difficult problems of life, and that even that fraction cannot be dealt with adequately except in the light of a wide range of domestic, economic, and scientific considerations quite excluded from the conception of the state of citizenship. We find that our political problems involve race questions, questions of the assimilation of diverse types of language and custom; we find that most serious political questions grow out of underlying industrial and commercial changes and adjustments; we find that most of our pressing political problems cannot be solved by special measures of legislation or executive activity, but only by the promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding. We find, moreover, that the solution of the difficulties must go back to a more adequate scientific comprehension of

the actual facts and relations involved. The isolation between state and society, between the government and the institutions of family, business life, etc., is breaking down. We realize the thin and artificial character of the separation. We begin to see that we are dealing with a complicated interaction of varied and vital forces, only a few of which can be pigeon-holed as governmental. The content of the term "citizenship" is broadening; it is coming to mean all the relationships of all sorts that are involved in membership in a community.

This of itself would tend to develop a sense of something absent in the existing type of education, something defective in the service rendered by the school. Change the image of what constitutes citizenship, and you change the image of what the purpose of the school is. Change this, and you change the picture of what the school should be doing and of how it should be doing it. The feeling that the school is not doing all that it should do in simply giving instruction during the day to a certain number of children of different ages; the demand that it shall assume a wider scope of activities having an educative effect upon the adult members of the community, has its basis just here. We are feeling everywhere the organic unity of the different modes of social life, and consequently demand that the school shall be related more widely, shall receive from more quarters, and shall give in more directions.

As I have already intimated, the older idea of the school was that its primary concern was with the inculcation of certain facts and truths from the intellectual point of view, and the acquisition of certain forms of skill. When the school became public or common, this notion was broadened to include whatever would make the citizen a more capable and righteous voter and legislator; but it was still thought that this end would be reached along the line of intellectual instruction. To teach children the constitution of the United States, the nature and working of various parts of governmental machinery, from the nation through the state and the county down to the township and the school district—to teach such things was thought to prepare the pupil for citizenship. And so some fifteen or twenty

years ago, when the feeling arose that the schools were not doing all that they should be doing for our life as a whole, this consciousness expressed itself in a demand for a more thorough and extensive teaching of civics. To my mind the demand for the school as a social center bears the same ratio to the situation which confronts us today as the movement for civics bore to the conditions of half a generation ago. We have awakened to deeper aspects of the question; we have seen that the machinery of governmental life is, after all, but a machinery and depends for its rightness and efficiency upon underlying social and industrial causes. We have lost a good deal of our faith in the efficiency of purely intellectual instruction.

Some four specific developments may be mentioned as having a bearing upon the question of the school as a social center. The first of these is the much-increased efficiency and ease of all the agencies that have to do with bringing people into contact with each other. Recent inventions have so multiplied and cheapened the means of transportation, and the circulation of ideas and news through books, magazines, and papers, that it is no longer physically possible for one nationality, race, class, or sect to be kept apart from others, impervious to their wishes and beliefs. Cheap and rapid long-distance transportation has made America a meeting-place for all the peoples and tongues of the world. The centralization of industry has forced members of classes into the closest association with, and dependence upon, each other. Bigotry, intolerance, or even an unswerving faith in the superiority of one's own religious and political creed, are much shaken when individuals are brought face to face with each other, or have the ideas of others continuously and forcibly placed before them. The congestion of our city life is only one aspect of the bringing of people together which modern inventions have induced.

That many dangers result from sudden dislocations of people from the surroundings—physical, industrial, and intellectual—to which they have become adapted; that great instability may accompany this sudden massing of heterogeneous elements, goes without saying. On the other hand, these very agencies present

instrumentalities which may be taken advantage of. The best as well as the worst of modern newspapers is a product. The organized public library with its facilities for reaching all classes of people is an effect. The popular assembly and lyceum is another. No educational system can be regarded as complete until it adopts into itself the various ways by which social and intellectual intercourse may be promoted, and employs them systematically, not only to counteract dangers which these same agencies are bringing with them, but so as to make them positive causes in raising the whole level of life.

Both the demand and the opportunity are increased in our large cities by the commingling of classes and races. It is said that one ward in the city of Chicago has forty different languages represented in it. It is a well-known fact that some of the largest Irish, German, and Bohemian cities in the world are located in America, not in their own countries. The power of the public schools to assimilate differing races to our own institutions, through the education given to the younger generation, is doubtless one of the most remarkable exhibitions of vitality that the world has ever seen. But, after all, it leaves the older generation still untouched; and the assimilation of the younger can hardly be complete or certain as long as the homes of the parents remain comparatively unaffected. Indeed, wise observers in both New York and Chicago have recently sounded a note of alarm. They have called attention to the fact that in some respects the children are too rapidly, I will not say Americanized, but too rapidly denationalized. They lose the positive and conservative value of their own native traditions, their own native music, art, and literature. They do not get complete initiation into the customs of their new country, and so are frequently left floating and unstable between the two. They even learn to despise the dress, bearing, habits, language, and beliefs of their parents—many of which have more substance and worth than the superficial putting on of newly adopted habits. If I understand aright, one of the chief motives in the development of the new labor museum at Hull House has been to show the younger generation something of the skill and art and historic meaning in the industrial habits

of the older generations—modes of spinning, weaving, metal-working, etc., discarded in this country because there was no place for them in our industrial system. Many a child has awakened to an appreciation of admirable qualities hitherto unknown in his father or mother for whom he had begun to entertain a contempt. Many an association of local history and past national glory has been awakened to quicken and enrich the life of the family.

In the second place, along with this increasing intercourse and interaction, with all its dangers and opportunities, there has come a relaxation of the bonds of social discipline and control. I suppose none of us would be willing to believe that the movement away from dogmatism and fixed authority is anything but a movement in the right direction. But no one can view the loosening of the power of the older religious and social authorities without deep concern. We may feel sure that in time independent judgment, with the individual freedom and responsibility that go with it, will more than make good the temporary losses. But meantime there is a temporary loss. Parental authority has much less influence in controlling the conduct of children. Reverence seems to decay on every side, and boisterousness and hoodlumism to increase. Flippancy toward parental and other forms of constituted authority waxes, while obedient orderliness wanes. The domestic ties between husband and wife themselves, as well as to their children, lose something of their permanence and sanctity. The church, with its supernatural sanctions, its means of shaping the daily life of its adherents, finds its grasp slowly slipping away. We might as well frankly recognize that many of the old agencies for moralizing mankind, that kept men living decent, respectable, and orderly lives, are losing in efficiency—particularly those agencies whose force rested in custom, tradition, and unquestioning acceptance. It is impossible for society to remain purely a passive spectator in the midst of such a scene. It must search for other agencies with which it may repair the loss, and which may produce the results the former methods are failing to secure. Here, too, it is not enough for society to confine its work to children.

However much they may need the disciplinary training of a widened and enlightened education, the older generation needs it also. Besides, time is short, very short, for the average child in the average city school. The work is hardly more than begun there, and unless it is largely to go for naught the community must find methods of supplementing it and carrying it farther, outside the regular school channel.

In the third place, the intellectual life, facts, and truths of knowledge, are much more obviously and intimately connected with all other affairs of life than they ever have been at any previous period in the history of the world. Hence a purely and exclusively intellectual instruction means less than it ever meant before. And, again, the daily occupations and ordinary surroundings of life are much more in need of interpretation than ever they have been before. We might almost say that once there was a time when learning related almost wholly to a world outside and beyond that of the daily concerns of life itself. To study physics, to learn German, to become acquainted with Chinese history, were elegant accomplishments, but more or less useless from the standpoint of daily life. In fact, it is just this sort of idea which the term "culture" still conveys to many minds. Where learning was useful, it was only to a comparatively small and particularly select class in the community. It was something that only the doctor or lawyer or clergyman needed in his particular calling, but so far away from and above the mass of mankind that it could only awaken their blind and submissive admiration. The recent public lament regarding the degradation of the teacher's calling is, to my mind, but a reminiscence of the time when to know enough to be a teacher was something which of itself set off the individual in a special class by himself. It fails to take account of the changes which have put knowledge in common circulation, and made it possible for every man to be a teacher in some respect unto his neighbor.

Under modern conditions, practically every sphere of learning, whether of social or natural science, may impinge at once, and at any point, upon the conduct of life. German is not a fact, knowledge of which makes a distinction between a man

and his fellow, but a mode of social and business intercourse. Physics is no longer natural philosophy—something concerned with remarkable discoveries about important but very remote laws; it is a set of facts which, through the applications of heat and electricity to our ordinary surroundings, constantly comes home to us. Physiology, bacteriology, anatomy, concern our individual health and the sanitation of our cities. Their facts are exploited in sensational if not scientific ways in the daily newspapers. And so we might go through the whole schedule of studies, once so foreign and alien, and show how intimately concerned they now are with commonplace life. The simple fact is that we are living in an age of applied science. It is impossible to escape the influence, direct and indirect, of the applications.

On the other hand, life is getting so specialized, the divisions of labor are carried so far, that nothing explains or interprets itself. The worker in a modern factory who is concerned with a fractional piece of a complex activity, present to him only in a limited series of acts carried on with a distinct portion of a machine, is typical of much in our entire social life. The old worker knew something of his process and business as a whole. If he did not come into personal contact with all of it, the whole was so small and so close to him that he was acquainted with it. He was thus aware of the meaning of the particular part of the work which he himself was doing. He saw and felt it as a vital part of the whole, and his horizon was extended. The situation is now the opposite. Most people are doing particular things of whose exact reasons and relationships they are only dimly aware. The whole is so vast, so complicated, and so technical that it is next to out of the question to get any direct acquaintanceship with it. Hence we must rely upon instruction, upon interpretations that come to us through conscious channels. One of the chief reasons for the success of some of the great technical correspondence schools of the present day, besides the utilitarian desire to profit by preparation for better positions, is an honest eagerness to know something more of the great forces which condition the particular work one is

doing, and to get an insight into those broad relations which are so partially yet tantalizingly hinted at. The same is true of the growing interest in forms of popular science, which is a marked portion of the stock in trade of some of the best and most successful of our modern monthly magazines. This same motive has added much to the effectiveness of the university-extension movement, particularly in England. It creates a particular demand for a certain type of popular illustrated lecture. Unless the lives of a large part of our wage-earners are to be left to their own barren meagerness, the community must see to it, by some organized agency, that they are instructed in the scientific foundation and the social bearings of the things they see about them and of the activities in which they are themselves engaged.

The fourth point of demand and opportunity is the prolongation, under modern conditions, of continuous instruction. We have heard much of the significance of prolonged infancy in relation to education. It has become almost a part of our pedagogical creed that premature engagement in the serious vocations of life is detrimental to full growth. There is a corollary to this proposition which has not as yet received equal recognition. Only where social occupations are well defined and of a pretty permanent type can the period of instruction be cut short at any particular period. It is commonly recognized that a doctor or a lawyer must go on studying all his life if he is to be a successful man in his profession. The reason is obvious enough. Conditions about him are highly unstable; new problems present themselves; new facts obtrude. Previous study of law, no matter how thorough and accurate, does not provide for these new situations. Hence the need of continual study. There are still portions of the country where the lawyer practically prepares himself before he enters upon his professional career. All he has to do afterward is to perfect himself in certain finer points, and get greater skill in the manipulation of what he already knows. But these are the more backward and unprogressive sections where change is gradual and infrequent, and where therefore the individual prepared once is prepared always.

Now, what is true of the lawyer and the doctor, in the more

progressive sections of the country, is true to a certain extent of all sorts and degrees of people. Social, economic, and intellectual conditions are changing at a rate undreamed of in past history, and unless the agencies of instruction are kept running more or less parallel with these changes, a considerable body of men is bound to find itself without the training which will enable it to adapt itself to what is going on. It will be left stranded and become a burden for the community to carry. Where progress is continuous and certain, education must be equally certain and continuous. The youth at eighteen may be educated so as to be ready for the conditions which will meet him at nineteen; but he can hardly be prepared for those which are to confront him when he is forty-five. If he is ready for the latter when they come, it will be because his own education has been keeping pace in the intermediate years. Doubtless conversation, social intercourse, observation, and reflection upon what one sees going on about him, the reading of magazines and books, will do much; they are important, even if unorganized methods of continuous education. But they can hardly be expected to do all, and hence they do not relieve the community from the responsibility of providing, through the school as a center, a continuous education for all classes of whatever age.

The fourfold need, and the fourfold opportunity, which I have hastily sketched, defines to some extent the work of the school as a social center. It must provide at least part of that training which is necessary to keep the individual properly adjusted to a rapidly changing environment. It must so interpret to him the intellectual and social meaning of the work in which he is engaged that it will reveal its relations to the life and work of the world. It must make up to him in part for the decay of dogmatic and fixed methods of social discipline. It must compensate him for the loss of reverence and of the influence of authority. And, finally, it must provide means for bringing people and their ideas and beliefs together, in ways that will lessen friction and instability, and introduce deeper sympathy and wider understanding.

In what ways shall the school as a social center perform these

various tasks? To answer this question in anything like detail is to pass from my allotted sphere of philosophy into that of practical execution. But it comes within the scope of a theoretical consideration to indicate certain general lines. First, there is a mixing up of people with each other; a bringing them together under wholesome influences, and under conditions which will promote their getting acquainted with the best side of each other. I suppose, whenever we are framing our ideals of the school as a social center, what we think of particularly is the better class of social settlements. What we want is to see the school, every public school, doing something of the same sort of work that is now done by a settlement or two scattered at wide distances through the city. We all know that the function of such an institution as Hull House has been primarily not that of conveying intellectual instruction, but of being a social clearing-house. It is not merely a place where ideas and beliefs may be exchanged in the arena of formal discussion, for argument alone breeds misunderstanding and fixes prejudice; but it is much more a place where ideas are incarnated in human form and clothed with the winning grace of personal life. Classes for study may be numerous, but they are regarded as modes of bringing people together, of doing away with the barriers of caste or class or race or type of experience that keep people from real communion with each other.

The function of the school as a social center in promoting social meetings for social purposes suggests at once another function—provision and direction of reasonable forms of amusement and recreation. The social club, the gymnasium, the amateur theatrical representation, the concert, the stereopticon lecture—these are agencies the force of which social settlements have long known, and which are coming into use wherever anything is doing in the way of making schools social centers. I sometimes think that recreation is the most overlooked and neglected of all ethical forces. Our whole Puritan tradition tends to make us slight this side of life, or even condemn it. But the demand for recreation, for enjoyment just as enjoyment, is one of the strongest and most fundamental things in human

nature. To pass it over is to invite it to find its expression in defective and perverted form. The brothel, the saloons, the low dance house, the gambling den, the trivial, inconsiderate, and demoralizing associations which form themselves on every street corner, are the answer of human nature to the neglect, on the part of supposed moral leaders, of this factor in human nature. I believe that there is no force more likely to count in the general reform of social conditions than the practical recognition that in recreation is a positive moral influence which it is the duty of the community to take hold of and direct.

In the third place, there ought to be some provision for a sort of continuous social selection of a somewhat specialized type—using “specialized,” of course, in a relative sense. Our cities carried on evening schools long before anything was said or heard of the school as a social center. These were intended to give instruction in the rudiments to those who had little or no early opportunities. So far they were and are good. But what I have in mind is something of a more distinctly advanced and selective nature. To refer once more to the working model upon which I am pretty continuously drawing, in the activities of Hull House we find provision made for classes in music, drawing, clay-modeling, joinery, metal-working, and so on. There is no reason why something in the way of scientific laboratories should not be provided for those who are particularly interested in problems of mechanics or electricity; and so the list might be continued. Now, the obvious operation of such modes of instruction is to pick out and attract to itself those individuals who have particular ability in any particular line. There is a vast amount of unutilized talent dormant all about us. Many an individual has capacity within himself of which he is only dimly conscious, because he has never had an opportunity for expressing it. He is not only losing the satisfaction of employment, but society suffers from this wasted capital. The evils of the unearned increment are as nothing beside those of the undiscovered resource. In time, I am confident, the community will recognize that it is quite as natural and necessary a part of its own duty to provide such opportunities for adults as will enable

them to discover and carry to some point of fulfilment the particular capacities that distinguish them, as it is to give instructions to little children.

In conclusion, we may say that the conception of the school as a social center is born of our entire democratic movement. Everywhere we see signs of the growing recognition that the community owes to each one of its members the fullest opportunity for development. Everywhere we see the growing recognition that the community life is defective and distorted except as it does thus care for all its constituent parts. This is no longer viewed as a matter of charity, but as a matter of justice — nay, even of something higher and better than justice — a necessary phase of developing and growing life. Men will long dispute about material socialism, about socialism considered as a matter of distribution of the material sources of the community; but there is a socialism regarding which there can be no such dispute: socialism of the intelligence and of the spirit. To extend the range and the fulness of sharing in the intellectual and spiritual resources of the community is the very meaning of the community. Because the older type of education is not fully adequate to this task under changed conditions, we feel its lack and the demand that the school shall become a social center. The school as a social center means the active and organized promotion of this socialism of the intangible things of art, science, and other modes of social intercourse.

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