

# The Relation of Public Schools to Life

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In the growth and development of society constant changes and readjustments are going on. Just because human society is made up [of] constantly changing forces, its institutions are of necessity subject to constant change. Systems of education and institutions of education are no exception. Here, as elsewhere, we are in the midst of great problems that demand the greatest care and thought, and the most careful and far-reaching administration. In what I shall say this evening I want to try to point out one or two of the principles that ought to guide us as citizens in our attitude towards our schools. What I have in mind to say is not related to the technical questions of education that would interest the men and the women who do the work, and carry on our schools, but rather it has to do with such questions as you and I, as citizens, might talk over together in an evening's conversation. Particularly I hope that it will have something to do with some of the ideas that the young men and women, who are leaving the public schools tonight will carry out into the world with them, and put into practical application in the years when they shall have taken upon their shoulders some of the burdens and responsibilities of mature life.

The first point to be recalled in our conversation together is that the necessity for schools arises only when civilization has advanced to a considerable degree of complexity. I remember visiting a colony from the Phillipine [sic] Islands exhibited at the World's Fair at St. Louis in 1904. They were of a very low order of civilization, living in rather crude bamboo huts, and practicing very primitive customs. I was particularly interested in watching the children. The skill and dexterity with which

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<sup>1</sup> There is no explicit date for this manuscript. The text strongly suggests that this was a public high school commencement address: "...the ideas that the young men and women, who are leaving the public schools tonight will carry out into the world with them..." In addition, the text references the on-going work to reign in child labor, work that was underway while Davis was in Pittsfield. Earl Davis had spoken to Pittsfield's public schools before, and it is not implausible to place this talk during his time in Pittsfield.

those children handled the tools and the knowledge of their civilization was most remarkable. For example, their use of the bow and arrow, one [of] the implements of their daily life, was remarkable. The ease with which they handled it, and the accuracy with which it was used were witness to the thoroughness and naturalness of their training. There was nothing artificial about [it], but simply a natural skill made efficient by constant practice. Viewed from the standpoint of their environment, they were highly educated children. They could use with remarkable skill the simple tools of their simple type of life. If we stop to think this situation over, we are bound to say that they were educated, not because they had been to school, but because they had not been to school. In their simple crude life these children were able to live in much closer touch with the real life than are our children today. They came in daily contact with the men and the women of the tribe, and learned by close observation, and actual experience the habits, customs and wisdom of the tribes that had produced them. They did not need schools; their every hour was a natural training and discipline into the kind of life that they were destined to live. By a simple natural process, without any real revolutionary plunges from school life to real life, they grew to take the responsibility and the work that their life demanded of them. That was a real education. They were trained by the real method that we in our present condition try to imitate by our so-called laboratory methods, and shop practices.

But in our more complicated civilization of today such a method of training is impossible. The boy cannot follow his father into the factory, or the business house, or the professional work, and be with him all day, watching his movements and learning little-by-little all that the father knows. It would be too dangerous, too utterly foolish. Indeed, the girl can hardly follow the mother about all her household cares, or stand over her while she runs the machine in the mill, or works in the sweatshop, or plays bridge. The thing is impossible. Our social customs and institutions are altogether too complicated. That being the case, we resort to the institution of education. We remove the boys and the girls from real life, from their natural teachers, the parents, and their natural surroundings, into the school with its specialized work, its artificial surroundings, and its professional teachers. The necessities of our modern life demand it.

Now the particular task of the schools in our highly complicated civilization is apparent. Their task is to assist the child in fitting himself for the largest and best possible

life that he is capable of. During the years when the child is growing from infancy to manhood and womanhood we attempt, through the schools of all grades, to assist the child in his growth, so that he shall live the most satisfactory life possible, and render the greatest possible service to society. In the broadest sense, this education that we assist the child with should cover three great fields. The part which we might term the physical education, should have to do with the development of the strong vigorous body, and the capacity to earn the necessities of life by some kind of sane serviceable honest work. Nature supplies an abundance of raw material for food, shelter, raiment and other needs of human life. It is a part of the necessity and the zest of life to make use of that raw material in making it to suit our demands. Closely related with this aspect of the task comes the intellectual work, the development of the mind, and the power of the mind to meet with and to successfully handle the various problems that life presents, and the various avenues of enrichment that are opened to the broad keen mind. In the third place, closely dovetailed in with the other two, comes what may be termed moral training, developing the capacity to understand the proper relations of men and women to each other and to the world, its laws and forces. These three aspects of education cannot really be separated in fact. We can only separate them in conversation for purposes of clearness. In reality they are going on together all the time, either blindly, and disastrously, or under wise and careful direction, pregnant with great possibilities.

So much then for the nature and the purpose of the work that we are trying to do in our educational systems. But what about the material that we have to work on in the shape of the children? Here is where we are making the most cruel and fundamental mistake of all today. We do not recognize that the material is human. That it is the embodiment and the concentration of the greatest of all forces of the universe. In some of our schools we seem to forget that the child has any personality. We treat him as if he were a mass of inert clay to be shaped and molded according to our own whims, and if not suited to our molds, he is cast aside as useless and worthless, perhaps to be beaten and bruised by some brute in a reform school, or cast onto the rubbish heap of our brutal industrial system.

Before we continue further, let us pause for a moment to consider some of the great forces that are struggling for life and expression in these delicate sensitive personalities whom we are trying to assist through our educational systems. For

purposes of clearness we will try to break up in our imagination that tremendous force of personality, and look at it under various manifestations.

In the first place, we must consider that, as a whole, we are dealing with the most tremendous power of the universe, the power of life, the power that has forced its way through millions of years to the power of evolution in human life. In these children there is present the same power that has made human history glorious with love, achievement and adventure. We grow tense with excitement as we read the wonderful pages of human history in which is recorded all that we pronounce worthwhile. The great advancements of civilization in labor, invention, in government, in wisdom, and culture, all this has been made by just such men and women as we see growing up in our midst today. People turn to the pages of the past, and pay their tributes to the dead who have done great work, but they forget that all that they ever were and more is right here at our feet in the young men and the young women growing up in our very midst. We garnish the tombs of the dead prophets, and we crucify the living Christ in the children of our own loins.

One of the simplest forms in which this great impulse to life shows itself is in the love of adventure. When the child first rouses himself to go away from his own door, and to see what is going on in the other street, or out in the fields and the woods, or when he first imagines that he is meeting with strange animals and doing wonderful things we forget that we are witnessing the first manifestations of the great spirit of life that has made the life of humanity rich. Here is being born that same spirit that sent Columbus across the ocean to discover this new country, the same spirit that brought our forebears of two centuries ago, or of yesterday, to these shores, and the same spirit that explored and settled this great vast country of ours. You pay your respect to the spirit of the past, the spirit that has made men leave all behind them and sail unknown seas, and travel unknown lands, that has made [him] explore the universe for truth, and yet when that spirit shows in our children, we do about all that we can to crush it. When the child looks to us for adventure and reality, we shut him up in a kindergarten, or a school of some kind, and try to entertain him. He wants to do something that calls his courage and his imagination into play, and all that we have to offer him is the dead monotony of the city streets, with their dirt and their filth and their slime. Do you wonder that children, boys especially in veins there flows the blood of a race whose history is characterized by no other word so well as the word

adventure, do you wonder that such boys, when this first adventurous spirit appears, break through the confines of our smug respectable standards, and take their adventure where they can find it. If, by chance, in responding to this great force in them, they do some of the things that we, in our brutal city life, think that they ought not to do, we punish them, send them to some fool reformatory to be bent and made to do what no human being ought to do, namely to crush the very life that God gave them. Pray, tell me, what real effort do we make in our public schools to take that adventurous heroic spirit of youth, and develop it into a great force that shall become potent in the days to come, not for mis-directed evil, but for good? Take our corrupt political life, calling for men of courage and the adventurous spirit, as the dry parched ground calls for rain, are we making any great effort to turn this waste energy of youth like a great river through the Augean Stables of our political life to the end that they shall be cleansed. God knows that we need it bad enough, and yet we are spending time in crushing the spirit, and making these children docile and drudging slaves of commercial aspiration. This is one of the great tasks in the school life of today, to give this spirit a healthy and wholesome chance to express itself, to ally itself to real life, and real problems, just as when it appears in the child of the savage, [and] he goes from the wigwam into the woods, or sits and watches the brave. But we have so double-standardized our lives, that we are ashamed to have our children about us, as we, with daring and courage, rush into the business whirl, and kill, at long range, men, women and children that we may bring home our golden trophies of commerce and industry. So, not providing ample opportunity for our children to develop in a natural wholesome way, the spirit of life that God has given them, not having a sufficiently respectable life code, so that we feel like trusting them in the midst of our real activities, we more-and-more separate our schools from real life, and more-and-more destroy the life of the growing generation, and more-and-more are the schools becoming detached from real life, and the children deprived of the wholesome life of reality, and wide companionship with their parents and elders are becoming unnatural and inefficient.

But pass to another aspect of the way in which this impulse to life shows itself, that of work. There has arisen in society today a great contempt for labor. There are just and serious reasons for this, and the revolt against what people feel to be degrading toil is but another evidence of the great fact that you can't tie humanity to a machine. It is bound to break away. In the artist we find the work idea at its best. He has

something in him, a tremendous impulse to make something. The true artist will almost starve for the chance to make what he desires to make. He does not do it for the money there is in it, but because he has something to say. On the other hand, we have the man who cares little or nothing about doing anything, but he finds that he must do something in order to live. Combine these two ideas and you have a picture of what work ought to be. It ought to be a means of getting the necessities of life, and it ought to be the means of expressing, in the work, the inner soul of the workman.

Now in childhood the work idea has developed but slightly. There all is play, with just a suggestion of work. But during the process of the school years, the impulse to work should gradually supplant the impulse to play, and at the close of the school period, the work idea should be so well developed that recreation and pleasure should share with the impulse to work, and should take their proper place. But we have so distorted things that we have come to look upon work largely as a necessary evil to be endured for the sake of the pleasure that it provides us with in the hours of relaxation. In the simple rural life of a century ago, the child grew up taking on each year an additional share of the work of the farm, as his strength and inclination permitted. By the time he was full grown, he was doing a man's work and could hardly draw the line and say here is where I stopped playing and here is where I began work. It was a natural evolution, in the process of which each aspect of life assumed its proper place. Today we are witnessing the development of two movements side-by-side, each movement being fought out at great sacrifice by those interested. On the one hand, we have witnessed the movement against child labor. Through the legislatures and the courts people have carried on the crusade to exterminate the brutalities of child labor. In order to protect our children from the grinding toil of the factories we have been compelled to take them out of the factories. The job is not complete, but it will be some day. But on the other hand, we have been equally zealous in our attempts to provide trade and vocational schools because we have seen that the children were not being provided with the proper education for life. Some have said that we must provide manual training to interest the children in school life; others have said that we must do it to enable them to to earn a living; while still others seem to think that our industrial life demands that we fit children for its interests. But for one reason or another, many have come to see that in the schools there must be some kind of vocational training. Now when you put these two movements face-to-face what do they both together say?

Why they simply say that our industrial greed has become so brutal and inhuman that we do not dare trust a child inside the walls of our factories. They simply say to us that the conditions of industrial life are so brutal that they sacrifice the physical and moral life of our children upon the alters of their dividends and profits. But on the other hand, our children, thus excluded from the vicious realities of real life as a matter of self-preservation, find the schools so unnatural and artificial, that it has become, and is becoming more-and-more necessary to seek to imitate the realities of common-life less their inhuman aspects, by providing trade and vocational schools.

It has, in short, come to this point in our society today that when a child, instilled with the natural desire to do some real work and develop gradually into the stature of manhood or womanhood, we are compelled to say to them, "No, my child, we do not dare to let you go among real men in their work, until you are full-grown and are capable of fighting for your own life, for they are so avaricious that they will take advantage of your youth and lack of strength, and will work you to death if no one interferes. But we have provided for you a little artificial real world, where you may play that you are working, and where you may do something of the things that [are] in real life."

Surely this is the most scathing criticism that we are passing upon our modern industrialism, by these two great movements. Our factories are such vicious holes that we dare not let our children inside their doors, and when they come and ask us for this little taste of real work we give them this artificial substitute. It is as if our own children should come to us and say, "We want now to come from the nursery into the home life, and be with you grown-ups," and we, with guilty consciences, should say, "No, our home life is so brutal and so cruel and so immoral, that we dare not let you into it, but I tell you what we will do, we will build another house that looks like our house, and we will hire a man and a woman to act as [father and] mother, and that will have to do in place of the real home life that we are ashamed to let you into."

But it is something to our credit that we [are] ashamed of our factory life and are making an effort to keep the children out of them. In our shame may be the hope of our redemption, and in the children reared in these artificial schools of vocation may be developed the moral vigor and adventurous spirit that will overthrow the vicious aspects of the real factory life.

But we come now to the third great force of human life that is developing in the children whom we are trying to assist in our public schools. It is after all the greatest of the three, for it includes them all in its grasp. Today you young men and young women are feeling the strange forces of idealism growing within you. Hardly can you account for it, but you live less in the present than you have. You are building plans for the future; you are thinking of manhood and womanhood, perhaps you have already painted in your imagination the kind of a noble man or woman you want to become. Perhaps the adventurous spirit within you, touched by the strength of some noble personality, has already filled you with the hope of some noble work and achievement for your life. Perhaps, disgusted by the vulgar pursuit of wealth of our generation, or sickened by the betrayal of political life in the hands of men of affairs, you have already resolved to cast the strength of your personality into the struggle for justice and freedom against the encroaching demands of privilege. If you have, I beg of you to never falter. Humanity needs this day men of courage, of ideals, of conviction. Respond to that call.

This force that makes you dream these dreams of the future is the force of human life. It is the force that makes the pure home, the great reformer, the noble statesman, the devoted father, and the noble mother, the force that makes men and women that are worthwhile. This is another of the forces that we, as people interested in men and women and in the school life of boys and girls, are shamefully neglecting. Directed properly, nurtured properly, this force makes the land alive with all that makes life rich. Misdirected, undisciplined, crushed, or bruised, it carries in its wake the most terrible hells that human beings ever devised. But since our commercial greed has compelled us to remove so much of the lives of our children from the realities of the real world, into the little artificial world of the school, so it is compelling us to transfer the development of this growing impulse from the actual conditions to the more protected, but less human, aspects of life as seen in the schools. One of the worst aspects of modern life is the way in which commercialism is making use of the perfectly natural impulses of life, and perverting them into vicious channels for the sake of the money that is to be made out of their exploitation. Take for example, not only in the large cities, but in the small towns, the natural impulse of youth for pleasure and fellowship [that] is being exploited for gain at the cost of all that is worthwhile in human life. The growing variety of pleasures, offered by commerce for purposes of gain, are making it more-and-more difficult for the homes and small

groups of families to compete with them in claiming the attention of the children. This is especially true where the low wages and the high cost of living, and the deadly pace of workmen, make it almost impossible for the average family to provide healthy wholesome recreation and pleasure for their children. Their attention is diverted away from the home and the home life, and the home-loving impulses which should be encouraged and developed, and the family solidarity which should be fostered during these years is crushed and left behind. Again, real life, or the life fostered by commerce in its relation to the pleasures of young people, is becoming so lowered by the greed for gains, that thinking people must be considering what shall be done. Again, we have to withdraw children from the outside life, to the secluded school life. But the secluded school life is not real, even if it is good. But it is fundamentally right in this one thing, that its prime interest is in the greatest and best life of the growing men and women, while the actual life outside is willing to sacrifice men, women and children alike for the sake of profits and indolent luxury. It cares nothing for life.

We have seen, in viewing the present situation from the point of those who are interested in schools, that all the great developments of today either consciously or unconsciously unite in declaring that our real business and commercial life, both in the factory and the office, is not the proper place for the training of children, and that the spirit of greed has so invaded the field of pleasures, that even amusements have taken on the same character as the factory, and are perfectly willing to sacrifice the child for the dollar.

Also we have seen that the school life thus removed from real conditions, and out of contact with the men who take part in the modern traffic, are in danger of becoming so unreal as to defeat their ends, and develop a generation of inefficient, unrelated people.

Now, what is worth considering in this situation from the point of view of the schools? The step seems to me most apparent. The schools cannot invade the business and factory life and make that what it ought to be. That is the work of other forces. But the schools can make the school life more real, and human, leaving out the viciousness that is unnecessary.

We can make the schools centers of real life. In breaking up the mechanical machinery of the present, and affording more

elasticity, and demanding more vigorous, and individual work, in making the child more of a thinking being and less of an automatic machine, in making the school work more productive in the variety of its training, so that the child may have a chance to find himself while yet in school, and know what is in him. In the manual and vocational work, extended to real life, lie great possibilities.

Finally, in the general social and pleasure side of life, let the school jump into the breach, and make this great contribution to the growth of modern life. Let the schoolhouse be a place for families, a center where people will come for good wholesome pleasure, recreation and fun. I wish that in every block of our cities, and in every four corners in the country, there might be one of the schools from which people should never graduate. Lectures, dances, general life, so that the old should have a chance to come in contact with the young, and the young with the old, and there might develop a spirit as strong and as vital.