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THE CITY AND THE CHILD

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ADDRESS OF DR. WILLIAM H. MAXWELL

New York City is preëminently the field for children's playgrounds. New York City has probably more need of children's playgrounds than any other city in the country, for three reasons:

First, because of its vast foreign population, alien in language, alien in habits, alien in traditions, whom it is necessary to convert into American citizens and to raise to the American plane of living.

Secondly, because of the density of population, which is injurious to morals and breeds diseases, and, if not corrected by some other agency, causes serious deterioration of the human kind. Our statistics show that on Manhattan Island alone there are 100 blocks with a population of over 1000 persons to the acre, and that the average density of population on what is known as the lower East Side is 700 persons to the acre. There are large sections of Brooklyn and other parts of the city where the population is almost as dense as on the East Side of Manhattan.

Third, because of the prevalent method of housing people in the congested districts in enormous tenement houses, where light and air are nearly always deficient, where there is seldom any space for the children to play except in the street, and where the incessant noise prevents children from enjoying that long sweet sleep which is the natural right of childhood.

In counteracting the evil influences of congestion of population, and in converting the tens of thousands of immigrants who every year settle in this city into American citizens and raising them to a higher plane of living, the place of honor must be given to the public school. When I speak of the public school, I refer particularly to the teaching of the public school and the habits of order, industry, silence, and respect inculcated therein. But in this city I must also include under the public school the activities known as recreative centers, vacation schools, and playgrounds. In other words, the educational authorities of this city have taken the ground that it is their duty not only to provide education in the ordinary sense of that term, but recrea-

tion and recreative work under wholesome surroundings. In discussing this subject I shall treat of the following topics:

First: What the Board of Education of New York City has done in the way of providing facilities for children's play outside of school hours.

Second: What additional facilities for recreation might be provided in case adequate financial support were forthcoming.

Third: Some suggestions as to the administration of children's recreation which have grown naturally out of our public school experience.

I. What has been accomplished during the session of 1907–08:

The Board of Education maintained, in addition to its vast system of evening schools, its vast system of public lectures for adults, and the manifold activities of the Public School Athletic League, 28 evening recreation centers for young people of both sexes. In these recreation centers the unit of organization is the boys' or girls' club. In these clubs, composed of young men and young women who work during the day, there were upward of 400. Each club, subject to the general supervision of a supervisor employed by the education authorities, is self-governing, elects its own officers, and evolves its own programs of literary and athletic work and recreation. Usually, the members of the club spend one evening in their club exercises and two or three evenings of the week in gymnastic work and calisthenics, quiet games, and reading from books and periodicals furnished by the public library. The boys instinctively take to apparatus work and gymnastics, and the girls to folk dancing. The gymnastic work has led to numerous athletic tournaments and the literary work to debating tournaments in which our young working-girls have shown themselves entirely capable of holding their own with their young men competitors, and which compare very favorably with the interscholastic debates in our high schools. The aggregate attendance last year in these recreation centers was 1,834,885, or an average evening attendance of 9859. During last summer the Board of Education maintained twenty-seven vacation schools for a session of six weeks in July and August. Except in the case of classes established for backward children in the public schools who desired to do special work to secure promotion in September or to prepare for obtaining legal papers necessary to enable them to go to work, the exercises in these schools come under the head of what I have called recrea-

tive work. They consist of Venetian iron work, joinery, fret sewing, whittling, leather and burnt wood, basketry, and chair-caning for boys; cooking, housekeeping, knitting and crocheting, nursing, advanced sewing and dressmaking, millinery, basketry, and embroidery for girls; kindergarten for the small children of both sexes, and nature study, gardening, art study, and excursions to places of local historic interest for both boys and girls. The aggregate attendance for the six weeks in 1908 was 434,139; the average daily attendance was 14,586. The cost of these vacation schools for six weeks was $49,350.27.

The other activity maintained during the summer is vacation playgrounds. The total number of playgrounds maintained last summer was 105. Of these, 64 were for boys and girls in school basements and yards; 6 were outdoor playgrounds for boys and girls; 5 were kindergarten centers maintained in institutions. In 19 cases the playgrounds and rooms of school-houses in congested districts were open for mothers and babies of the tenements, and 11 were evening playgrounds on the roofs of school-houses. The aggregate attendance last summer in these playgrounds was 3,641,633, and the average daily attendance was 76,200, at a total cost of $70,273.36.

In a few of our newer buildings shower baths for children have been installed. During the regular school year 370,137 baths were given. During the summer months 259,850 baths were given. I venture to say that no other agency in this city did as much for the comfort, cleanliness, and health of our children as these baths. The total cost of the baths was $2,609.56. The cost of these baths figures out to be about one cent a bath.

As to the character of the work done in these vacation schools and playgrounds, I prefer not to characterize it myself, but to read you a letter written by an intelligent visitor from another city, who wrote as follows to Miss Evangeline E. Whitney, our admirable Superintendent of Playgrounds:

> "My dear Miss Whitney:
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> "I write * * * to send you a line in regard to the impressions which I received during my visit to the playgrounds of Brooklyn and Manhattan.
>
> "The most astonishing feature was the enormous numbers gathered in each place, proving without further argument the crying necessity for their existence. The organization seems also remarkable in view of the numbers

and the absolute freedom allowed the children. The very evident enjoyment of those who gather to sing and dance or play is a gratification to an observer who realizes how few of the good things in life fall to the share of this great congregation of the poor. The earnestness and enthusiasm of those in authority in the playgrounds are in evidence on every side.

"Babies sleeping quietly in hammocks touch one's heart. Happy youngsters high in swings are a delight to the eye.

"In every place which I visited the entire absence of quarrelsome or unhappy children was most pronounced.

"I was deeply impressed by the restful, contented expression on the faces of the children whom I saw in the game rooms, quietly occupying themselves, using brains and fingers in working out their little triumphs in the game. This was an ideal condition—restful occupation—rest for the restless little bodies that at all other times of the day are rushing here and there at home and abroad; rest for the restless little brains because interest in the game precludes other thought intruding; rest for the tired little eyes which from waking to sleeping again see ever before them the great throngs of people moving through these horribly congested city districts. While the active occupations of dancing and running are very attractive to this class of children, it adds to their comfort and general improvement to realize that motion and noise are not necessary elements in amusement. The class of children who gather in these summer playgrounds are the ever restless ones—nervous, excitable, often badly nourished, early pushed and driven forward in the battle of life. What a triumph for our system to inculcate some elementary idea of poise and self-control even in their recreation! How eagerly the little ones listened to the instructors! I saw the hot, restless little bodies quiet in repose, gathered in circles around the storyteller, who charmed with tales unknown, which carried knowledge in their wake. For the little tots there were fairy tales of Frank Dinslow, folk lore; Eugene Field's and Whitcomb Riley's children's poems; older circles enchanted with George MacDonald's 'At the Back of the North Wind,' Miss Mulloch's 'Little Lame Prince,' etc., etc. When I think of the countless tales poured into our children's ears which educate them from the cradle to the grave, then realize the entire absence of such an educative force among the children from ignorant homes, the thought of the reading rooms and storytelling seems to me, if you will pardon the misquotation, 'the shadow of a great rock' in a weary city."

Such are the activities for recreation purposes maintained by the New York Board of Education.

II. What might be done if we had more money:

If we had $200,000 instead of $90,000 for the maintenance of recreation centers during the school year, we could easily maintain 75 such centers instead of 28, to which we were limited last year. These centers could provide physical exercises, recreation, and places for reading and study in the evening for all boys and girls who, being at work during the day, desire to spend their evenings in recreation and recreative work. They could also provide quiet study rooms for study under direction in the case of all tenement house school children who have no place to study at home and who, in the nature of the case, can obtain little or no encouragement from their parents in their school work. I cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of the study room in the school for the tenement house child who hears no English spoken in his home, who has no place in which to study except the overheated living room of the large family, and whose parents have little understanding of or sympathy with the child's efforts. Instead of the parents assisting the children in their school work, it is often the case—and it is one of the results of which we have the greatest reason to be proud—that it is the child who, through the benign influence of the school and the playground, inducts the parents into the mysteries of American life and converts the rooms of the tenement from a place of disorder and squalor into a well-ordered home.

We do not intend, if we can by any possibility obtain the financial resources, to rest content with recreative work given only in the evening. There is recreative work of the highest personal and economic service that may be done in the afternoon. All our newer school buildings and many of our older buildings are now equipped with kitchens in which cooking, laundry work, and housekeeping are taught, and workshops in which the hands and eyes of our boys are being trained in carpentry. The curriculum of the elementary school provides that the children of the seventh and eighth years shall have access to these shops and kitchens. Theoretically, if all children entered school at the age of six years and were promoted regularly at least every half year, the children working in these shops and kitchens would range from twelve to fourteen years. Unfortunately, however, this theory is not realized in practice. Owing chiefly to our vast

immigration, there are more children between twelve and fourteen years of age, or even over fourteen years of age, in the first six years of the elementary school than in the last two years. These over-age children in the lower grades are the children who go to work at the first moment the law allows—at fourteen years of age. They go out after two or three years of schooling with the most meager equipment in the way of an English education, and with practically no vocational training for boys in handiwork, or for girls in sewing, dressmaking, and housekeeping. They have had no training, either, that would fit them to earn a living or that would fit them to administer at home; and yet if our shops and kitchens were thrown open from 3 to 6 o'clock every afternoon and on Saturday forenoon, and if money were forthcoming to employ properly qualified teachers during these hours, all these children would receive this very necessary equipment for their life work. As it is, they go out to swell the ranks of unskilled labor and to lead the hopeless lives of those who struggle in vain against a hostile environment with which they are not trained to cope. An experiment which we tried last spring in one school in an Italian neighborhood proves conclusively that children of the character I describe will eagerly take advantage of work in the carpenter shop and the kitchen if the opportunity is given them. In this one school in which the shops and kitchens were thrown open in the afternoon, there was an average afternoon attendance of 842. I regard the opening of our school shops, kitchens, and gymnasiums in the afternoons as one of the most important and useful means at our disposal for elevating the masses in this city. The experiment I have described shows that it is only necessary to give the opportunity for this training to demonstrate that it will be taken advantage of.

In the second place, if we had $75,000 a year more in addition to our present appropriation, we could maintain 60 vacation schools in the summer instead of 27, and keep them open for eight weeks instead of six. I believe further that the expenditure of this money would, before very long, show that it was really an economy. The experiment recently tried of opening a few classes for children who had failed of promotion in June in the regular day school and for those who desired to obtain working papers, shows that the extension of this work would bring about a rapid promotion of many children who now spend two or even three terms in doing school work which ought to be

accomplished in one term. Any instrumentality which enables the backward child to advance at least the normal rate of speed through the grades is an economy both in school accommodations and in the teaching equipment of the regular schools.

If our appropriation for vacation playgrounds were doubled; that is, if we had, say, $140,000 instead of $70,000, we could maintain 200 playgrounds or more instead of 105. Such a number would place a playground—if not of an ideal, at least of a most serviceable, kind—within easy reach of every child and of every tired mother and baby in the congested districts of New York.

The cost of running our children's baths is very slight, but the baths themselves are expensive to install. I know of no better way in which a wealthy philanthropist could promote the physical and moral welfare of the rising generation, their health, cleanliness, and comfort, than by placing, say, one-quarter of a million dollars at the disposal of the Board of Education for the construction of shower baths in all our school buildings in the poorer neighborhoods. As I draw books myself from a Carnegie library and watch the children of the public schools go there to obtain their reading matter, I bless the great iron master for what he has done for the intellectual improvement and recreation of people of this city; and yet the usefulness, from a moral and hygienic point of view, of the Carnegie libraries is small compared with the advantages that would flow from the benevolence of him who shall increase the number of public school baths.

We find here in this city many thoughtless people who criticize these outside activities maintained by our Board of Education. Those who make these criticisms forget that there is no waste of municipal resources comparable in extent with the waste which would ensue were a great real estate investment, such as the public school buildings, now estimated to be worth $98,000,000, kept closed and unused nineteen hours out of the twenty-four.

III. Suggestions as to the administration of playgrounds resulting from public school experience:

The first suggestion I have to offer is that a playground should not be cheaply administered. A playground, to be entirely beneficial, must be run as far as possible by persons specially trained for the work. A playground that is not under

reasonable control, in which freedom of action is not tempered by forbearance toward others, in which there is not obedience to and respect for authority, will be less effective merely as a means for promoting physical health, and may be an injury to the moral welfare of the children.

Second: Our experience in this city is that pure play and pure amusement soon fall upon children of all ages, and that free play or directed play, games—athletic and social—are most enjoyed and produce the best results when mingled with recreative work, either handwork or intellectual work. Eagerness to do something, to create, is an instinct and passion of childhood. Neither swinging on a trapeze nor dancing, however graceful, will ever satisfy this natural passion. Every playground should be made a means not only of training children to play, but of training them to observe with the eye and work with the hand.

Third: The school-house and its environment is the most useful place for a playground. Public parks are in summer generally too much exposed to the heat of the sun, while the loiterers and loafers by whom they are infested render them in many sections of this city a very undesirable and very dangerous place for little children. The school building offers perfect protection from all unfavorable conditions of the weather and from all contaminating influences to which children are exposed in parks and recreation piers, and, moreover, it is only in the school-house that the equipment is to be found which enables us to give children the recreative work that should always be intermingled with play. Lastly, if you will permit me to say so, the Playground Association of America can realize the purposes of its existence in no more thorough way, and can confer no greater boon on the children of America, than by using its great influence to obtaining from boards of financial control the necessary funds with which to provide in and around public school buildings, every week in the year and every day in the week, recreative work and properly directed play for the children of the neighborhood outside of school hours. Every dollar that is spent on a school playground prevents ten thousand dollars of waste in the failure to use public school buildings.