

Jane Addams, "Foreign-Born Children in the Primary Grades," *National Educational Association Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting Held at Milwaukee, Wis., July 6-9* (University of Chicago, 1897): 104-112.

The following paper is given with great diffidence. The writer has never been a teacher, nor even a close observer, in primary schools. She only had unusual opportunities for seeing the children of immigrants during and after the period of their short school life. She submits some of the observations and reflections which have come to her concerning the great mass of those children who never get beyond the primary grades, in the hope that they may prove suggestive to the educators present. The observations are confined to the children of the Italian colony lying directly east of Hull House, in the nineteenth ward of Chicago, although what is said concerning them might be applied, with certain modifications, to the children of Chicago's large Bohemian and Polish colonies.

For the purpose of this paper it will be best to treat of the school as a social institution, within which a certain concentration of social interests takes place, for the purpose of producing certain social results. This is certainly legitimate, if we take Dr. Dewey's statement that "the school selects, and presents in an organized manner, influences and instruments which may expedite and facilitate the socializing of the individual." Certainly, after the child leaves school his experiences consist of his partici-
[end page 104] pation in the social life in the various groups of which he is a member, or with which he comes in contact.

Whatever may be our ultimate conception of education, and however much we may differ in definition, as doubtless the members of this convention do widely differ, we shall probably agree that the ultimate aim is to modify the character and conduct of the individual, and to harmonize and adjust his activities; that even the primary school should aim to give the child's own experience a social value; and

that this aim too often fails of success in the brief sojourn of the child of the foreign peasant in the public school.

The members of the nineteenth ward Italian colony are largely from south Italy, Calabrian and Sicilian peasants, or Neapolitans, from the workingmen's quarters of that city. They have come to America with a distinct aim of earning money, and finding more room for the energies of themselves and their children. In almost all cases they mean to go back again, simply because their imaginations cannot picture a contiguous life away from the old surroundings. Their experiences in Italy have been that of simple, out-door activity, and the ideas they have have come directly to them from their struggle with nature, such a hand-to-hand struggle as takes place when each man gets his living largely through his own cultivation of the soil, with tools simply fashioned by his own hands. The women, as in all primitive life, have had more diversified activities than the men. They have cooked, spun, and knitted, in addition to their almost equal work in the fields. Very few of the peasant men or women can either read or write. They are devoted to their children, strong in their family feeling to remote relationships, and clannish in their community life.

The entire family has been upheaved, and is striving to adjust itself to its new surroundings. The men for the most part work on railroad extensions through the summer, under the direction of a padrone, who finds the work for them, regulates the amount of their wages, and supplies them with food. The first effect of immigration upon the women is that of idleness. They, of course, no longer work in the fields, nor milk the goats, nor pick up fagots. The mother of the family buys all the clothing not only already spun and woven, but made up into garments of a cut and fashion beyond her powers. It is, indeed, the most economical thing for her to do. Her house cleaning and cooking are of the simplest; the bread is usually baked outside of the house, and the macaroni bought prepared for boiling. All of those

outdoor and domestic activities, which she would naturally have banded on to her daughters, have slipped away from her. The domestic arts are gone, with all their absorbing interests for the children, their educational value and incentive to activity. A household in a tenement receives almost no [end page 105] raw material. For the hundreds of children who have never seen wheat grow there are dozens who have never seen bread baked. The occasional washings and scrubblings are associated only with discomfort. The child of these families receives constantly many stimuli of most exciting sort from his city street life, but he has little or no opportunity to use his energies in domestic manufacture, or indeed, constructively, in any direction. No activity is supplied to take the place of that which, in Italy, he would naturally have found in his own home, and no new union is mad for him with wholesome life.

Italian parents count upon the fact that their children learn the English language and American customs before they themselves do, and act not only as interpreters of the language about them, but as buffers between them and Chicago, and this results in a certain, almost pathetic dependence of the family upon the child. When a member of the family, therefore, first goes to school, the event is fraught with much significance to all the others. The family has no social life in any structural form, and can supply none to the child. If he receives it in the school, and gives it to his family, the school would thus become the connector with the organized society about them.

It is the children aged six, eight and ten who go to school, entering, of course, the primary grades. If a boy is twelve or thirteen on his arrival in America, his parents see in him a wage-earning factor, and the girl of the same age is already looking toward her marriage.

Let us take one of these boys, who has learned in his six or eight years to speak his native language, and to feel himself strongly identified with the fortunes of his family.

Whatever interests has come to the minds of his ancestors has come through the use of their hands in the open air; and open air and activity of body have been the inevitable accompaniments of all their experiences. Yet the first thing that the boy must do when he reaches school is to sit still, at least part of the time, and he must learn to listen to what is said to him, with all the perplexity of listening to a foreign tongue. He does not find this very stimulating, and is slow to respond to the more subtle incentives of the classroom. The peasant child is perfectly indifferent to showing off and making a good recitation. He leaves all that to his schoolfellows who are more sophisticated and who are equipped with better English. It is not the purpose of this paper to describe the child's life in school, which the audience knows so much better than the writer, but she ventures to assert that if the little Italian lad were supplied, then and there, with tangible and resistance-offering material upon which to exercise his muscle, he would go bravely to work, and he would probably be ready later to use the symbols of letters and numbers to record and describe what he had done; and he might even be incited to the exertion of [end page 106] reading to find out what other people had done. Too often the teacher's conception of her duty is to transform him into an American of a somewhat snug and comfortable type, and she insists that the boy's powers must at once be developed in an abstract direction, quite ignoring the fact that his parents have had to do only with tangible things. She has little idea of the development of Italian life. Her outlook is national and not racial, and she fails, therefore, not only in knowledge of, but also in respect for, the child and his parents. She quite honestly estimates the child upon an American basis. The contempt for the experiences and languages of their parents which foreign children sometimes exhibit, and which is most damaging to their moral as well as intellectual life, is doubtless due in part to the overestimation which the school places upon speaking and reading in English. This cutting into his family loyalty takes away one of the most conspicuous and valuable traits of the Italian child.

His parents are not specially concerned in keeping him in school, and will not hold him there against his inclination, until his own interest shall do it for him. Their experience does not point to the good American tradition that it is the educated man who finally succeeds. The richest man on Ewing street can neither read nor write-even Italian. His cunning and acquisitiveness, [*sic*] combined with the credulity and ignorance of his countrymen, have slowly brought about his large fortune.

The child himself may feel the stirring of a vague ambition to go on until he is as the other children are; but he is not popular with his school-fellows, and he sadly feels the lack of dramatic interest. Even the pictures and objects presented to him, as well as the language, are strange.

If we admit that in education it is necessary to begin with the experiences which the child already has, through his spontaneous and social activity, then the city street begins this education for him in a more natural way than does the school.

The south Italian peasant comes from a life of picking olives and oranges, and he easily sends his children out to pick up coal from railroad tracks or wood from buildings which have been burned down. Unfortunately, this process leads by easy transition to petty thieving. It is easy to go from the coal on the railroad track to the coal and wood which stand before the dealer's shop; from the potatoes which have rolled from a rumbling wagon to the vegetables displayed by the grocer. This is apt to be the record of the boy who responds constantly to the stimuli and temptations of the street, although in the beginning his search for bit of food and fuel was prompted by the best of motives. The outlets offered to such a boy by the public school have failed to attract him, and as a truant he accepts this ignoble use of his inherited faculty. For the dynamic force which the boy has within himself, the spirit of adventure and restless activity, many unfortunate outlets are constantly offered. [end page 107]

The school, of course, has to compete with a great deal from the outside in addition to the distractions of the neighborhood. Nothing is more fascinating than that mysterious "down town," whither the boy longs to go to sell papers and black boots; to attend theaters, and, if possible, to stay all night, on the pretense of waiting for the early edition of the great dailies. If a boy is once thoroughly caught in these excitements, nothing can save him from overstimulation, and consequent debility and worthlessness, but a vigorous application of a compulsory-education law, with a truant school; which, indeed, should have forestalled the possibility of his ever thus being caught.

It is a disgrace to us that we allow so many Italian boys thus to waste their health in premature, exciting activity; and their mentality in mere cunning, which later leaves them dissolute and worthless men, with no habits of regular work and a distaste for its dullness.

These boys are not of criminal descent, nor vagrant heritage. On the contrary, their parents have been temperate, laborious, and painstaking, living for many generations on one piece of ground.

Had these boys been made to feel their place in the school community; had they been caught by its fascinations of marching and singing together as a distinct corps; had they felt the charm of manipulating actual material, they might have been spared this erratic development. Mark Crawford, for many years the able superintendent of the Chicago House of Corrections, has said that in looking over the records of that institution he found that of 21,000 boys under seventeen years of age who had been sent there under sentence less than eighty were school-boys.

The school is supposed to select the more enduring forms of life, and to eliminate, as far as possible, the trivialities and irrelevancies which actual living constantly presents.

But, in point of fact, the Italian child has received most of his interests upon the streets, where he has seen a great deal of these trivialities, magnified out of all proportion to their worth. He, of course,

cares for them very much, and only education could give him a clue as to what to select and what to eliminate.

Leaving the child who does not stay in school, let us now consider the child who does faithfully remain until he reaches the age of factory work, which is, fortunately, in the most advanced of our factory states, fourteen years. Has anything been done up to this time, has even a beginning been made, to give him a consciousness of his social value? Has the outcome of the processes to which he has been subjected adapted him to deal more effectively and in a more vital manner with his present life?

Industrial history in itself is an interesting thing, and the story of [end page 108] the long struggle of man in his attempts to bring natural forces under human control could be made most dramatic and graphic. The shops and factories all about him contain vivid and striking examples of the high development of the simple tools which his father still uses, and of the lessening expenditure of human energy. He is certainly cut off from nature, but he might be made to see nature as the background and material for the human activity which now surrounds him. Giotto portrayed the applied arts and industries in a series of such marvelous beauty and interest that every boy who passed the Shepherd's Tower longed to take his place in the industrial service of the citizens of Florence. We, on the contrary, have succeeded in keeping our factories, so far as the workers in them are concerned, totally detached from that life which means culture and growth.

No attempt is made to give a boy, who, we know, will certainly have to go into one of them, any insight into their historic significance, or to connect them in any intelligible way with the past and future. He has absolutely no consciousness of his social value, and his activities become inevitably perfectly mechanical. Most of the children who are thus put to work go on in their slavish life without seeing whither it tends, and with no reflections upon it. The brightest ones among them, however,

gradually learn that they belong to a class which does the necessary work of life, and that there is another class which tends to absorb the product of that work.

May we not charge it to the public school that it has given to this child no knowledge of the social meaning of his work? Is it not possible that, if the proper estimate of education had been there; if all the children had been taught to use equally and to honor equally both their heads and hands; if they had been made even dimly to apprehend that for an individual to obtain the greatest control of himself for the performance of social service, and to realize within himself the value of the social service which he is performing, is to obtain the fullness of life-the hateful feeling of class distinction could never have grown up in any of them? It would then be of little moment to himself or to others whether the boy finally served the commonwealth in the factory or in the legislature.

But nothing in this larger view of life has reached our peasant's son. He finds himself in the drudgery of a factory, senselessly manipulating unrelated material, using his hands for unknown ends, and his head not at all. Owing to the fact that during his years in school he has used his head mostly, and his hands very little, nothing bewilders him so much as the suggestion that the school was intended as a preparation for his work in life. He would be equally amazed to find that his school was supposed to fill his mind with beautiful images and powers of thought, so [end page 109] that he might be able to do this dull mechanical work, and still live a real life outside of it.

I know a boy who has finished the third grade, and who shovels coal all day, with no notion of where the coal comes from nor of the processes of combustion, nor of anything else connected with it. Yet it would have been far easier to have taught him all of those things than his laborious reading and writing, which he never uses, and is fast forgetting. His reading was supposed to have extended his intercourse far beyond the limits of his immediate environment in time and space; but he has never

learned to read with enough facility to enjoy it, nor has he ever made enough connection between his reading and his outside world to induce him to go on with it under difficulties.

Foreign-born children have all the drudgery of learning to listen to, and read and write an alien tongue; and many never get beyond this first drudgery. I have interrogated dozens of these children who have left school from the third, fourth, and fifth grades, and I have met very few who ever read for pleasure. I have in mind an Italian boy whose arithmetic was connected with real life, while his reading was not. He is the son of a harnessmaker who, although he can neither read nor write, kept his little shop, and slowly made money. The great ambition of his life was that his son Angelo should be enough of a scholar to keep his books and to read him the daily papers; for he had a notion that the latter told you when and how to buy leather to the best advantage. Angelo was kept steadily at school until he was in the fifth grade. He used to come every evening to Hull House for help in his arithmetic, bringing with him slips of paper on which was written the amount of his father's sales during the day. His father himself could not add, but remembered accurately what he had charged for each thing he had disposed of. Before Angelo left school he read fairly well from the Fifth Reader. Five years have passed since then, and, although he keeps the accounts of the shop in which he had a vivid interest from the first, he has almost wholly forgotten how to read. He occasionally picks up a paper and attempts to read it to gratify his father, but he reads it badly and much dislikes the proceeding.

There is one fixed habit, however, which the boy carries away from school with him to the factory. Having the next grade continually before him as an object of attainment results in the feeling that his work is merely provisional, and that its sole use is to get him ready for other things. This tentative attitude takes the last bit of social stimulus out of his factory work, and he pursues it merely as a necessity. His last chance for a realization of social consciousness is gone.

From one point of view the school itself is an epitome of the competitive system, almost of the factory system. Certain standards are held [end page 110] up and worked for; and, even in the school, the child does little work with real joy and spontaneity. The pleasure which comes from creative effort, the thrill of production, is only occasional, and not the sustaining motive which keeps it going. The child in school often contracts the habit of expecting to do his work in certain hours, and to take his pleasure in certain other hours; quite in the same spirit as he later earns his money by ten hours of dull factory work, and spends it in three hours of lurid and unprofitable pleasure in the evening. Both in the school and the factory his work has been dull and growing duller, and his pleasure must constantly grow more stimulating. Only occasionally, in either place, has he had a glimpse of the real joy of doing a thing for its own sake.

Those of us who are working to bring a fuller life to the industrial members of the community, who are looking forward to a time when work shall not be senseless drudgery, but shall contain some self-expression of the worker, sometimes feel the hopelessness of adding evening classes and social entertainments as a mere frill to a day filled with monotonous and deadening drudgery; and we sometimes feel that we have a right to expect more help from the public schools than they now give us.

If the army of school children who enter the factories every year possessed thoroughly vitalized faculties, they might do much to lighten this incubus of dull factory work which presses so heavily upon so large a number of our fellow-citizens. Has our commercialism been so strong that our schools have become insensibly commercialized, rather than that our industrial life has felt the broadening and illuminating effect of the schools?

The boy in the primary grades has really been used as material to be prepared for the grammar grades. Unconsciously his training, so far as it has been vocational at all, has been in the direction of

clerical work. Is it possible that the business men, whom we have so long courted and worshiped in America, have really been dictating the curriculum of our public schools, in spite of the conventions of educators and the suggestions of university professors? The business man has, of course, not said to himself: "I will have the public school train office boys and clerks for me, so that I may have them cheap;" but he has thought, and sometimes said: "Teach the children to write legibly, and to figure accurately and quickly; to acquire habits of punctuality and order; to be prompt to obey, and not question why; and you will fit them to make their way in the world as I have made mine."

Has the workingman been silent as to what he desires for his children, and allowed the businessman to decide for him there as he has allowed [end page 111] the politician to manage his municipal affairs? Or has the workingman suffered from our universal optimism, and really believed that his children would never need to go into industrial life at all, but that his sons would all become bankers and merchants?

Certain it is that no sufficient study has been made of the child who enters into industrial life early, and remains there permanently, to give him some set-off to its monotony and dullness; some historic significance of the part he is taking in the life of the commonwealth; some conception of the dignity of labor, which is sometimes mentioned to him, but never demonstrated. We have a curious notion, in spite of all our realism, that it is not possible for the mass of mankind to have interests and experiences of themselves which are worth anything. We transmit to the children of working people our own skepticism regarding the possibility of finding any joy or profit in their work. We practically incite them to get out of it as soon as possible.

I am quite sure that no one can possibly mistake this paper as a plea for trade schools, or as a desire to fit the boy for any given industry. Such a specializing would indeed be stupid when our

industrial methods are developing and changing, almost day by day. But it does contend that life, as seen from the standpoint of the handworker, should not be emptied of all social consciousness and value, and that the school could make the boy infinitely more flexible and alive than he is now to the materials and forces of nature which, in spite of all man's activities, are unchangeable.

We do not wish to hold the school responsible for what should be charged up to the industrial system, but we may certainly ask that our schools shall not feed and perpetuate the baser features and motives of that system.

The isolation of the school from life-its failure to make life of more interest, and show it in its larger aspects-the mere equipping of the children with the tools of reading and writing, without giving them an absorbing interest concerning which they wish to read and write, certainly tends to defeat the very purpose of education.

The foreign-born child in the primary grades is given neither a greater use of his own powers in the social direction in which he will have to use them, nor yet an ability to share in the experiences of others,

I have ventured to speak thus frankly concerning the public school to a body of educators, because I realize that no one is so anxious as the teaching body itself to make the schools as effective and valuable as possible; and I may, perhaps, be able to realize even better than the teachers can how dependent a neighborhood of foreign-born colonists is upon the school as a socializing and harmonizing factor. [end page 112]