SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

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CHAPTER II

THE UNRULY SCHOOL: ITS GENERAL CAUSES

The Characteristic Symptoms of the Unruly Spirit,—We shall start, then, with a school in which the wrong “fashion” has become firmly established. A most unfortunate spirit, antagonistic to order and inimical to effort, dominates the pupils as a body. They are openly disrespectful to those in authority. Perhaps they sit sullenly in their classes, answering questions in monotones and monosyllables, only inertly attentive to the work in hand. They nudge each other when the teacher is not looking; indulge in smirks, giggles, and guffaws as the occasion seems to warrant; groan audibly when tasks are assigned; and, in general, indulge in that form of misbehavior which, for want of a better term, may be dubbed “smart-aleckism.” At the close of the recitation, they either saunter disdainfully or rush pell-mell back to their seats,—or, in a departmental school, back to the study or assembly room. In the “lines,” they are mischievous; on the playground they are defiantly rough, self-consciously boisterous, and intentionally rude. On the street they may hoot and jeer at strangers and “call names” at the teachers passing on their way to and from school.
Nor are the symptoms of a thoroughly unruly school limited to these collective manifestations of a defiant attitude. The individual pupil, taken to task by the individual teacher, will be sharp and insolent, or sullen and secretive. He will pretend not to hear questions and commands, loitering when requested to come quickly, dawdling over his tasks with an air of willfully inviting trouble. For scamped work, he will be ready with plausible excuses; against charges of carelessness or of misconduct he will assume the air of injured innocence.

It should be remembered that we are dealing here by definition and hypothesis with a school made up of boys and girls, otherwise quite "normal," who are governed by the wrong type of group standards; we are not dealing with mental or moral defectives. The pupils may come from good homes, and in these homes they may be fairly representative of normal, well-behaved, well-mannered children. But the moment that they enter the atmosphere of this unruly school, they are transformed literally into beings of another species; and the atmosphere of the school is not to be spatially limited; it extends to all situations in which the "school attitude" dominates the pupil.

The Causes of the Unruly School. — The first approach to the problem at issue, — the problem of reforming this unfortunate spirit, — lies naturally in a search for the causes that commonly lie back of the situation to be remedied. By hypothesis, the attitude of the pupils is general; of course, there are conspicuous
exceptions, for in the worst situations one will find individual pupils who are docile and tractable; but these often serve only to intensify the difficulties of the problem, for they are seldom leaders and the rewards that go to them for their good behavior simply stimulate their less docile fellows to renewed efforts at trouble-making. They set negative fashions, so to speak, because they are negative forces in the collective life of their juvenile community. Generally speaking, then, little help can be expected from these individual exceptions.

General Causes: (a) Harsh and Unsympathetic Treatment. — Of the possible causes of the unruly school, two may be cited first as probably more frequently operative than all others combined. One is careless, unsympathetic, sometimes even brutal treatment at the hands of teachers and principals who have become hardened through failure, and who teach school, as it were, “from hand to mouth.” That is, they preserve a sufficient measure of order to keep from actual dismissal, and yet are never able to generate enthusiasm over their work. Schools of this type are likely to exist in decadent city systems, where political influence governs appointments and ties the hands of administrative officers. These officers, indeed, not infrequently settle into the attitude of acquiescence in the lack of morale which characterizes the teaching force. Like the teachers themselves, they work from hand to mouth, reasonably content if each succeeding year finds them
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still holding their thankless offices, the recipients of a meager but still unearned wage.

As antecedents to conditions of this sort, one may all too frequently uncover tragedies of blighted hopes and decayed ambitions that would stimulate the pen of a Dickens or a Hugo. Men and women who have entered upon the work of teaching or of administration with an enthusiastic recognition of its possibilities and responsibilities have found themselves, when it is too late to change, fettered to a system that is cankered with political corruption, or held upon the lowest plane of efficiency by the inertia of a decadent community. Lacking the ability or the prestige to assume aggressive social leadership for the improvement of conditions they have been held to the wheel of routine until all of the spirit has been crushed from them.

Occasionally into such a system comes a superintendent with the power of leadership and with ideals of progress. But the decadence is often too far advanced to permit of regeneration. The entire school organization is infected with the virus; the older employees, secure in their appointments through long years devoted assiduously to keeping their "fences" in repair, habituated through their experience to the policy of doing the least work for a living wage, respond to the stimulus of reform with a deadening lack of interest or with reactionary conspiracies and cabals. The new superintendent may strive to remedy the situation, but finding the task beyond his strength, he too may sink to the
level of toleration and passive acquiescence which will soon lapse into somnolent indifference.

It is not the purpose of the present discussion to dwell upon the grave social dangers which inhere in situations of this sort. Obviously what is needed in such cases is a profound awakening of the community to its responsibilities. The evil here is community indifference, and can be effectively met only by community stimulation. But two or three alert and progressive teachers serving in such a community can do much to show the need for such a reform by making their own classrooms so radically different from the average in the community that the contrast will compel a recognition of the evils. This, we take it, rather than aggressive outside propaganda, is the field in which the classroom teacher can render the greatest service. And in the arid deserts represented by these decadent systems, one not infrequently finds oases of efficiency that could well stand as models of classroom service in any community. This is only another way of saying that the classroom teacher, even though subjected to the handicap of serving in a decadent system, can yet fulfill his or her own responsibilities in an effective way, and create a school spirit that will not be without a salutary influence upon the community as a whole.

The difficulties are numerous and onerous, but they are not insuperable. Perhaps the most serious is the powerful social pressure that comes from the teaching group as a whole, — a type of pressure common in some
labor organizations in which work that is above the average in efficiency is looked upon as inconsistent with the standards of the craft,—as an expression of disloyalty to one's fellow workers. Loyalty is a most important virtue, and must be listed among the prime requisites of a system of craft or professional ethics. But no craft or profession can permanently endure if its standards are inimical to public welfare; and such is surely the case when "loyalty" to one's fellow craftsmen precludes the highest possible development and application of individual skill.

Inadequate supervision is often a prime cause of this unprogressive, hand-to-mouth attitude of the teaching staff, quite apart from the coöperation of stultifying political or social factors. Teachers who must do their work without the stimulus of tangible and direct responsibility for disciplinary conditions may easily acquire habits of harshness, severity, and unsympathetic control that will easily give rise to a negative attitude of the pupil body toward the school and its work. And along with too little supervision in this connection must certainly be listed too much supervision of the wrong sort,—the nagging and querulous faultfinding that incites the teacher to gain the desired results by a reapplication to his pupils of the same nagging and faultfinding methods. Thus a school system that would seem from the outside to be admirably organized and most carefully supervised may reveal innumerable centers of disaffection.
(b) Indulgence and Weakness of Control. — A second general cause of the unruly school is quite the opposite of that just discussed. It may be summed up in the one word, “indulgence.” Here there is no harshness, no severity. Sympathy may be abundant, but it is of the wrong variety; it finds erroneous expressions in permitting lapses from good order to go unnoticed, in tolerating discourteous conduct, and in accepting scamped and careless work. Like the spoiled child in the indulgent home, the pupil group becomes overconscious of its own demands and gradually passes to the point of looking upon privileges as rights. The pupils may even assume a disdainful attitude toward the authority of the school and of the teachers, acting under the sincere belief that, in the school as in an organization of adults, all forms of government are unjust that do not rest upon the consent of the governed.

Back of this condition there is likely to be a crude philosophy of discipline held by those in authority or by influential individuals in the community. Indeed, to harmonize the practical necessities of child discipline with the principles of individual liberty is not an easy task, and those who approach this task with an emotional bias are quite likely to overshoot the mark. The tendency to solve intricate and fundamental problems by the nonchalant application of half truths and emotional shibboleths is all too common among social reformers, especially among those whose efforts must, from lack of training and experience, be decidedly amateurish. The
interest of the people in school work ought to be encouraged in every way, but the government of large masses of children is a quite different problem from the government of two or three children in the home (certainly vastly different from the government of one child, and it is from experience so limited as this that some of the most astounding suggestions for school reform frequently emanate). The management of a classroom of thirty or forty children or the management of a large pupil group aggregating from five hundred to two thousand immature souls is a special problem demanding specialized ability. It is not a problem with which amateurs can safely experiment.

There are also certain tendencies of a widely prevalent type which intensify the difficulties here suggested. The general attitude of the public both in America and abroad toward disciplinary measures has been radically transformed within the last two or three decades. As was stated in the preceding chapter, ethical standards have changed. Individual development and individual self-realization are ideals that have a wide and growing currency. The reaction against coercive methods of government finds a concrete expression in the demand that coercive measures be minimized in school practice. The right of the child to be well fed, well housed, and well taught easily suggests his right to work out his individual desires and impulses, untrammeled, so far as possible, by adult repression and control.

The large element of worth that inheres in this doc-
trine of individual rights should not blind one to the iniquities that may result from attempting suddenly to transform the government of the school consistently with its tenets. Individualism and collectivism have still many hard and knotty problems to compromise before the proper balance is struck; and, if we are not mistaken, some of these problems are centered in the government of the people’s schools. We shall have occasion to revert to this problem in a later discussion. In the present connection, it is enough to recognize that the attitude of disrespect for authority upon the part of the pupil has sometimes been effectually if not deliberately encouraged by the propaganda that has been undertaken to better the conditions of child life and to conserve child welfare.

A typical example of what well-meaning reformers may do quite unintentionally to pervert the attitude of children toward the authority of the law is to be found in the following quotation attributed to Judge Lindsey:

“In dealing with the problem of crime in youth, we shall make progress just in proportion as we appreciate the absurdity of limiting our remedies to the court, the jailer, and the hangman. Our plea for public playgrounds is a plea for justice to the boy. We are literally crowding him off the earth. We have no right to deny him his heritage, but that is just what we are doing in nearly every large city in this country, and he is hitting back, and hitting hard, when he does not mean to, while we vaguely understand and stupidly punish him for crime. Why shouldn’t he rebel? The amazing thing is that he is not worse than he is.”

1 Quoted in Journal of Education (Boston), Oct. 31, 1912.
We have strong faith in Judge Lindsey’s sincerity, and a deep appreciation for the fine altruism expressed in the above paragraph. And yet the quotation implies a specious argument that has already worked mischief in school management, whatever may have been its influence in civil government. *Why shouldn’t the boy rebel?* The situation oppresses him. So the industrial situation oppresses many people. Shall we encourage them for this reason to play fast and loose with the law of property? The marriage contract oppresses some people. Shall we indorse the doctrine of free love? Our system of import duties is far from equitable. Shall we palliate smuggling?

It is safe to say that the unfortunate disciplinary conditions in some schools may be traced to the prevalence of the fallacious reasoning that is likely to follow from the hasty acceptance of half truths regarding individual rights. The operation of this factor is not so frequently a cause of the unruly school as is the harsh, careless, and unsympathetic treatment referred to above. Its seriousness, however, is not adequately indicated by the relatively small number of schools in which it does operate, for these schools, though few in number, are among the most conspicuous, and are sometimes looked upon as models which represent the last word in educational progress.

(c) *The Inadequate Preparation and Brief Tenure of Teachers.* — The conditions described above are intensified by the lack of preparation that characterizes a large proportion of elementary school teachers, and by the brief tenure of service which makes the teache-
ing population a constantly changing body. There are in the public schools of the United States about 530,000 teachers. Of these it is safe to say that approximately one half (or more than 250,000) are twenty-four years of age or under; and approximately one fourth (or more than 125,000) are twenty-one years of age or under. Thousands of teachers are seventeen, eighteen, or nineteen years old.\(^1\) Stated in terms of the number of pupils taught, one may say with fair confidence in the accuracy of the statement that between four and five million boys and girls in our public schools receive all of their formal education from teachers who are scarcely more than boys and girls themselves.

The seriousness of this situation may not be apparent at first glance. Sometimes one will find competent and efficient teachers in this immature group; but the chances are strongly against efficiency. A certain measure of maturity is essential to sound judgment in dealing with children. The adolescent teacher is too close to childhood himself or herself adequately to appreciate the responsibilities of the trust that a teaching position involves. And this immaturity of judgment is likely to find its most unfortunate expression in dealing with difficult cases of discipline. One is likely to go either to the extreme of severity or to the extreme of leniency. The immature teacher has yet to

\(^1\)Computed from the tables in L. D. Coffman's *Social Composition of the Teaching Population*, New York, 1911.
learn a fundamental lesson that is very difficult to master, — the lesson of the “objective attitude,” the art of reading the personal factor out of the disciplinary situation;¹ and the immature teacher is also particularly subject to the foreshortened perspective which fails to see beyond immediate consequences.

The large proportion of young teachers in the public-school service suggests at once the near-lying cause of the condition, — namely, the brief time during which the average teacher remains in service. Of the half million teachers in our schools, approximately one fourth are new each year. In any case, one cannot be far wrong in stating that more than one hundred thousand new recruits are needed each year to fill the broken ranks of the teaching corps. The “average life” of the elementary school teacher is certainly not more than four years, and this means that approximately one half of all of those entering the teaching service leave this service before they have reached their fifth year of experience. One fourth of those entering leave at or before the close of their second year.

Disciplinary Efficiency a Product of Experience. — How much the ability to secure a reasonable measure of order in a classroom depends upon experience it is difficult to say, but certain facts justify the statement that, during the first three or four years, the average teacher is doing amateurish and not expert work. Ruediger and Strayer,² for example, had 204 elementary

school teachers "ranked" by their principals on the basis of "general merit" and found that no teacher with less than five years of experience found a place in either the first or the second rank; and they found further that the most important specific quality making up "general merit" in elementary teachers is disciplinary ability. Boyce,\(^1\) in a similar study of the qualities of merit among high school teachers (involving the "ranking" of 434 teachers by their principals) found no teacher in the first or second rank who had not had at least three years of experience; disciplinary ability, although not so prominent a factor in general merit here as among elementary teachers, still plays an important rôle.

**Disciplinary Weakness a Frequent Cause of Failure among Teachers.** — The data represented by these two studies are supplemented in a very interesting way by three studies of the causes of failure among elementary and high school teachers.

Littler\(^2\) obtained data regarding the causes of failure among 676 teachers who were dropped from the teaching staff in various types of elementary schools during the two years, 1908–1910. The cause most frequently noted by the principals and superintendents reporting was "weakness in discipline," and this cause accounted for more than fifteen per cent of all failures. Buellesfield,\(^3\) following Littler's method, has shown that this source

\(^1\) *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. iii, pp. 144 ff.
\(^2\) *School and Home Education*, March, 1914.
\(^3\) In an unpublished study on file in the library of the University of Illinois.
of failure is more frequently found among immature teachers of brief experience than among older teachers who have served longer. According to Buellesfield’s study, weakness in discipline was easily the most frequent source of failure among elementary teachers, accounting for 15% of all failures among women teachers and 22% of all failures among men teachers. Miss Cleda Moses¹ studied the causes of failure among high school teachers, collecting data regarding 205 cases, and discovering that weakness in discipline, while a frequent cause of failure, is not proportionately so significant here as among elementary teachers, — a conclusion that harmonizes with the results of the "merit" studies noted above.

*The Alleged Advantages of Youth and Inexperience in Teaching.* — As has been suggested, youth and inexperience are not without their advantages as parts of the teacher’s equipment. The young teacher, Professor O'Shea² says, "will make mistakes due to inexperience, but he will exhibit an enthusiasm and freshness and vigor and optimism which will go far to compensate for lack of experience." In so far as disciplinary troubles are concerned, however, the balance is decidedly against youth and inexperience, even granting the advantages to which Professor O'Shea refers. Enthusiasm, vigor, freshness, and optimism are not the prerogatives of adolescent boys and girls alone. With a reasonable

¹*School and Home Education*, January, 1914.
degree of maturity, enthusiasm can still be engendered, but there is no known way of putting old heads on young shoulders. Too many teachers lose their freshness and their optimism as they grow in years and experience, but this is not entirely the fault of the years or of the experience; it is often due to the unfortunate conditions under which their work must be done.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Add to the list given in the text characteristic symptoms of an unruly school spirit. What are the most common expressions of this unruly spirit?

2. In your own school experience, has harshness or indulgence been the more disastrous factor in breaking down, or preventing the development of, a wholesome "fashion" of good order?

3. Among the "spoiled" children of your acquaintance, what factors operating in homes of the children seem to have been primarily responsible for "spoiling" them?

4. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of a teaching population one fourth of which is made up of very young and inexperienced members. What measures would you suggest for insuring a larger proportion of mature and experienced teachers in our schools?

5. Contrast from your own experience in school the work of the inexperienced and the experienced teachers. From which group do you now feel that you received the greater benefit? In general, which group did you "like" the better? Which group had the less trouble with problems of discipline and order?