

The Child as a Wage-Earner

By J. J. KELSO, Superintendent Neglected and Dependent Children of Ontario.

I have been asked to take up the subject, "The Child as a Wage-Earner." It would probably harmonize better with my views if the subject were "The Child as a Wage-learner." For, briefly, my experience of life is, that all children should learn to work, that our school system is too academic, does not appeal to the average child, and does not adequately equip him for a useful and efficient and happy life. I favour the extension of the kindergarten principle, and the turning of most of our public schools into practical workshops for at least half time. All large industries should be encouraged to establish auxiliary training schools, with a six-hour day instruction in technique for boys and girls over fourteen. These training classes to be given recognition as public schools.

While a fair amount of education is the inalienable right of every child, the best welfare of the community as well as the interests of the child himself are apt to be jeopardized by the attempt to force a particular type of education upon all children.

Our educational system has overlooked that large class of children who are destined to earn their living with their hands, the boys who have brawn and muscle, but only a limited brain capacity. To such children the ordinary school course is usually distasteful and uninteresting.

School laws are steadily being made more stringent, and there is a tendency on the part of theoretical educationists to keep all boys, no matter what their future calling, in the schoolroom until they are sixteen. If the object is to create a nation of gentlemen, then this policy may be a wise one, but we cannot always depend upon foreigners to do the necessary manual labour of the country, nor the unskilled to carry on and develop great industries.

Dislike for work is already far too pronounced, and if boys are legally debarred from manual labour until they are sixteen they will never like it, for the love of work is acquired at an earlier age.

Not long ago the Chief Probation Officer of a large American city told me that he would have to forfeit his position if he said it publicly, but that his private opinion was that too many restrictions were being placed on boys who wanted to go to work. They were becoming street idlers, and in consequence a heavy burden was being thrown on the Juvenile Court.

In a town where truancy was said to be prevalent the Council unanimously adopted the proposal of one of the members that the Chief Constable should be appointed the Truant Officer, as they would in this way save money and also scare the boys into going to school. "The brass buttons will catch them," enthusiastically exclaimed the proposer, and a smile of approval greeted the remark. But is it true that the police uniform will frighten a restless, turbulent boy into the schoolroom? It has not been so in my experience. Harsh measures in dealing with the boy who prefers work to the schoolroom are more likely to provoke hatred and defiance, and to foster the rebellious spirit that believes it has some foundation of justice to warrant a warfare against law and order.

Truancy is frequently the beginning of a boy's contact with our legal machinery, and it is supremely important that all the procedure should inspire him with respect for the judiciary, and instil into him a saving fear of the consequences of wrong-doing. In the Juvenile Court, with kindness, there should be seriousness, decorum, and an entire absence of flippancy. Familiarity should not breed contempt.

The careful study of the wayward or troublesome adolescent boy is all-important, for here will be found the beginning of delinquency, the prolific source of a permanent and hopeless prison class. For boys must be led, not driven. They can rarely be forced to do what they don't want to do. It is easy enough to railroad them into a reform school, but they cannot learn in a residential institution of that type self-reliance and thrift, two essentials to a successful life, but they do learn the fatal

lesson that the country takes good care of the lazy and shiftless, and makes life pleasant and comfortable for them.

The point to be made clear is that education is of various sorts; that boys are of various kinds; and that what is good for one is not necessarily good for another. There is an education which is gained through manual training; through employment at reasonable hours in established industries; the knowledge to be gained at the actual bench of the workman, and in the experimental barn of the practical farmer, the horticulturist, the apiarist, and the poultryer.

Should not the public schools aim to educate the average child in practical handicrafts on the supposition that he is going to be an industrial worker and not a book-keeper, financier, or school teacher? Those who desire to have their children follow the professions can generally find the means to give them a specialized course, and this should not be a direct charge on the taxpayers.

There is no higher patriotic duty than to inculcate the nobility of labour. False notions and standards are all too prevalent and popular.

Mechanism, hammer and nails, cooking, and sewing should be more prominent in the curriculum of the common school than grammar and geography.

There should be organized excursion parties of the older boys to factories, house-building, and other industries. Observation and explanation and experiment will do more than books.

Motion pictures on educative subjects are coming on the market, and these might have a place in the school-room.

Instead of sending a truant boy to a reform school, the preferable plan would be to ascertain his tastes and ambitions, and if he still insists that school has no attractions for him, give him what he has a right to demand—a fitting outlet for his creative energy—or possibly place him with some small business firm that will employ him along the bent of his mind. No school law should be too rigid to permit of this.

A vocational association acting as an auxiliary to the School Board would help many young people to obtain congenial employment.

The messenger service is often decried, but there is no use absolutely condemning it, as many of our most successful men began their career in this way, and it is a good preparation for a more permanent position. It would be more reasonable to regulate and control it and to enlist the co-operation of business men with a view to reducing its recognized evils.

There should be no relaxation of efforts in restricting children from engaging in street trades, and eliminating the street-corner loafer. Boys should not be allowed to attend burlesque shows where moral standards are made the subject of parody and joke.

Especially should it be remembered that in dealing with restive, turbulent, erring youth much patience must be exhibited, and the boy forgiven, studied, helped, not once, but many times. The danger is in unreasonably expecting to bring about a transformation after one serious talk, whereas it is only through perseverance and sympathetic effort, and after many failures, that the boy is at last brought to realize that he has a friend; that he is evidently worth helping and saving, and that he has something given him in personal love and friendship on which to build the great ambitions and achievements of life.

Finally, in the case of the child, all work should be educational, all education of a practical character, looking to his future usefulness in the community, and the wages of the father should be sufficiently high to make the family independent of contributions from children. This, and the home without a father, opens up the wider question of social justice, a subject in which great interest is taken at the present time; and naturally this leads to a study of Workmens Compensation Acts, widows' pensions, conditions of employment, and home environment—matters that will, no doubt, receive due recognition from those who are faithfully seeking the solution of this great problem.