By Thomas S. Baker, Ph.D.
Headmaster of the York School, Port Depart, 386.

What Is the Matter with the Modern Boy?

If what respects is the American boy changing? His sports are different, his books are different, his habits are different. His school and his studies are different. He is possibly more alert, more self-reliant, better informed, more precocious. He has become more responsible. He has become more efficient. He is more a creature of distractions and amusements, and although he may be less of a boy physically, he is more of a boy intellectually.

There are few subjects of study that are more interesting to the average American boy. In spite of the fact that he is frequently badly spoiled, he is so adaptable and resourceful that he compasses often his affection, if not his approval. He knows about the finer things, every-day matters, and about almost everything else. The knowledge of which can be gained only from books. In view of the increasing excitement and the great share which young Americans are allowed to take in it, it would be mischievous if they were good students. It is to be feared that the average American boy of today is receiving the kind of instruction and is pursuing the kind of divinations that will lead to mental degeneracy and national incompetence.

Nowadays, the greatest thing in the life of the American boy of today is this—nothing other than the freedom it has. This is something that everybody wants to use. It is surrounded with a greater amount of excitement. This freedom requires a greater amount of questionable numbers. It has become conventionalized. Certainly, it is no secret that there is a greater amount of the boy's time and interest in the things that are to be done. The advantages of well controlled outdoor sport can hardly be overestimated. The change has taken place in the way that people have become interested, and especially that it has encouraged an important part in the thought of boys.

It is true that the type produced by our best boarding schools is the type of the experienced athlete. This is not a bad type, perhaps, but it is not a very desirable one. The schoolboy athlete is a comparatively new type, and it is a type which has no especial figure. In the boy's code it is accepted as a primary thing that everybody should aspire to be a star in one or more sports. He may be anything else that he wants to be athletic.

The boy is a grizzled and almost impossible one. He has already been trained. He is well versed in the social and political matters of his school. He is well versed in the political and social matters of his school, and he is aware of all the social and political matters of his school. He is aware of all the social and political matters of his school.

What is the social and political life of boys? It is the kind of life that is to be expected when a boy knows how to make use of his freedom. He has been trained to use his freedom. He has been trained to use his freedom. He has been trained to use his freedom.

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consider the fact that mechanics and machinery play a much larger part in the life of the average adult than ever before. The remarkable thing is the instinctive interest that boys display in mechanics. This feeling has, doubtless, led schoolmen to pay greater attention to manual training, but because boys like to do and undo things with their hands does not prove that this branch of study is going to help them greatly in gaining greater mental power and better methods of concentration.

I have been frequently asked what sort of things the boys of today like to read, and I have answered that they enjoy the popular presentation of mechanics and science. They like a short story with a great deal of action. They do not read many complete books unless they are of a peculiarly stirring character. Mention good literature to most boys and they at once place themselves in a posture of defense. The greatest element in their reading is the sporting pages of the newspapers. This is the boy’s favorite hunting ground. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of sports before he develops any interest in the other portions of the newspapers. If his schoolwork demanded an examination in the biographies of athletes or the condition of contemporary athletics, he would receive a mark that would make a strong contrast to his other averages.

The American boys’ school has changed in the last generation in many respects. Education, because it is so common, does not seem to be so valuable, and the boy’s respect for learning has certainly not increased. The school is now supplying many elements in the life of young people which it formerly did not possess.

Public school men are interested almost as much in the sociological side of their work as they are in the strictly academic features. On this account, as well as for many other reasons, the school has extended its sphere far beyond the old-fashioned limits of teaching the contents of books. It has become the centre of a much larger number of diversions. Athletics has a more important place in the life of schoolboys. The social features are more prominent. Some of these changes are doubtless for the better, but nearly all of them produce a wider dispersion of the boy’s attention, and he as a result has a lessened regard for the importance and value and dignity of scholarship. In the revolution that has taken place within the schools in the last generation nothing is more significant than the growth of the conception that there should be education, and practical value for whatever is presented in the boy’s course of instruction.

The freedom of the American boy’s existence has given him a certain kind of originality and mental independence that would make him of a good scholar if patience and industry could be added to his other admirable qualities. The education that he gets at school lags far behind what he learns from his surroundings—from his contact with people. If one could only harness the power that he seems to possess of absorbing knowledge from his associations, some of the problems of education would be solved. His cleverness and his resourcefulness seem to subside when brought face to face with the printed page.

The first step that is necessary to make things better is to realize that all is not as it should be. In order to make education more worth while it is necessary to get back to a simpler form of existence, to resist the encroachments that the unnatural amusements are making upon the time and attention of boys. Above all, effort should be made to gain for scholarship a more important place in the thoughts of Americans. Practical education, vocational and technical training are necessary if the resources of our country are to be developed wisely, but American scholarship and American schools should stand for something vastly bigger. American boys are not realizing their possibilities, and they will not do so until their lives are less artificial, and until the schools appreciate the necessity of greater thoughtfulness.

The schools can hardly be expected to create a race of mental giants, but they are likely to produce a nation of pigmies if the present tendencies in education continue. Recent reformers have set for themselves a standard of scholastic achievement which is so low that it is hard to believe their methods can produce men who will be able to accomplish anything that is distinguished. There is unquestionably a place in the American scheme of education for such theories. They help to make pleasant the lives of many children who are unable, on account of their surroundings or on account of their limited mentality, to do more serious school work; but a great danger to American life consists in making the very elementary accomplishments of such schools as modern educators would have us create a national standard of what American boys should do.

Possibly the picture of the American boy which is drawn here is done in colors that are too gloomy. When one goes over the list of one’s boy acquaintances he finds a good many who are real boys and who are unspoiled by the modern tendencies to which reference has been made. At the same time, in this list a not inconsiderable number inevitably lack discipline because of the failure of the homes to exclude the influences lurking everywhere to disturb the normal manner of living which is necessary if boys are to get the right kind of education. There is a feverishness, an unrest, an excitement in American life as it affects young people which bores ill for their proper development. High thinking and austere mental discipline seem to be strangely out of harmony with the occupations of a large part of the American youth.

I suppose General von Bernhardi would say that America needs a war to eliminate the flippancy and thoughtlessness and triviality of our boys. We certainly do not want a war, nor do we need one, but we do need a national shaking up—something that will make us realize fully that all is not well with the American youth, that the kind of training that many of them are receiving is not going to produce great thinkers, or great statesmen, or great artists. If only some one with an authoritative voice would proclaim convincingly the need of a more elevated program of education! If he could only make the public feel that it is not undemocratic for a nation to have an intellectual aristocracy! If such a man could make the people of the United States realize the emptiness and the futility of the lives of many American boys he would be doing a great blessing on the nation.