

**WORK AND OVERWORK IN RELATION
TO HEALTH IN SCHOOLS: AN ADDRESS
DELIVERED BEFORE THE TEACHERS GUILD
OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND AT ITS
FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE HELD IN
OXFORD, APRIL, 1893, PP. 5-68**

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AT ITS FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE

HELD IN

OXFORD

On the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th of April, 1893

BY

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I.

INTRODUCTION.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN,

I am deeply sensible of the honour which has been conferred upon me by the invitation of your President that I should open the discussion on Health in Schools, at this annual meeting in Oxford of the Teachers' Guild. The burden of implied responsibility, however, is to be measured by the honour of the position; and greatly, therefore, as I esteemed the confidence reposed in me, I felt considerable reluctance in accepting the duty, since I fully realized the fact that I should be addressing a body of experts, many of whom were more competent to fulfil the task. Indeed, had it not been for the special request of your President—a friend of twenty-two years' standing—I should scarcely have dared to undertake the important work. And those of you who know him as well as I do—able, esteemed, and amiable—will understand the difficulty of responding to any invitation of his with "No."

Moreover, I was further influenced in my decision

by the fact that I was not required to deliver an exhaustive address, but simply to initiate a discussion, and call your attention to those salient features of the subject upon which your ampler experience and specialized ability might profitably enlarge. It is always an advantage, too, whatever be the subject of consideration, that a member of an allied and friendly profession should express an opinion, if, as I have done, he has devoted thought and attention to the question; for even the mere point of comparatively outside view from which he speaks may help to throw light upon some of the problems involved.

I, therefore, ask your generous indulgence. I can at all events honestly, though diffidently, assure you that no one in your profession, or mine, is more keenly alive to the question of health at school: it has been my constant, patient, and thoughtful study for upwards of twenty years; and any unusual vigour of expression I may adopt, you will rightly attribute to the strength of convictions produced by an earnest consideration of this vital subject.

In reflecting upon your President's request, it seemed to me that the question of all others, which most closely touched your side of the subject and mine, was that for which schools are instituted, viz. education, or School Work. And seeing the delicate organization of the child who is placed under the teacher's influence for the purpose of education, it is incumbent upon us to be on our guard, that even the borderland of overwork is not reached; since it is

easy to overstep the line of safety, and cause lasting injury to the nascent brain.

The question that I desire each one to ask himself is, Does overwork occur at school? I maintain that it does, and sometimes to a very serious degree. The attempt of my paper, therefore, is to prove this case. If I succeed—and here diffidence gives place to certainty—the result must be an amendment of our ways. The general question of overwork has recently assumed large and definite proportions, and whatever may be our individual views upon it, we at least are standing on safe and substantially undebatable ground in discussing it in the interest of our boys and girls, who are practically impotent themselves in this matter, and dependent upon our decision.

It is a serious question to ask, whether teachers should be permitted to work, for the long hours at present in vogue, those whose physical and mental growth is as yet unfinished. Pupils are roused from sleep sometimes as early as 6.30 a.m., and are kept more or less at work until bedtime. Boys and girls at school certainly require as much protection as factory children!

It seems to be forgotten that a large share of strength is expended in providing for growth and development at the school age; so that the allotted task and the excessive hours tell doubly. The greatest drawback to the young human being at school is, that this growth and development necessarily proceed *pari passu* with education. This cannot be obviated. For education must take place while the tissues are in a

nascent state, since in this way only can they be developed into their highest state of perfection, whether they be nervous or muscular. At some schools—I think I may safely say most schools—the pupils are allowed insufficient time for sleep; they are often deprived of fresh air and exercise by school regulations, or unwisely assigned punishments; they have no time to masticate their food, owing to the hurry of school customs; and are frequently kept at, or permitted to, work for eleven hours a day and more. Since this address was written, I have seen a boy, aged fourteen, whose ordinary work allotted to him occupied him on one occasion fourteen hours in the day. Comment would only detract from the iniquity of such a proceeding.

Teachers of day schools will at once assert that I cannot accuse them of this charge, since they have not the opportunity. I need, therefore, only remind them of the large amount of home-work which in day schools is assigned to pupils for preparation alone in the evening. This is frequently the hardest toil of the day. It is work which requires the guidance of the teacher; and yet it has to be carried out without assistance, unless the parents provide a home-tutor, and at a time when body and brain are fatigued. I have heard of such children, often girls, sitting up at work until 10 p.m., and rising at 6 a.m. to resume the unfinished task of the previous evening. I know of others who work at lessons during meal-times, as well as in every spare moment, and, when unfinished,

continue them in bed, because parents insist upon books being closed at 9.30 p.m. Yet it is often said of these children that "they won't work," when it can only be truly stated that they are *too* willing.

Now, by an irony of phrase, this is termed "teaching," that is, developing the brain, and educing faculties in the young; whereas the process would be much more truthfully described as analogous to the production of that excellent savoury, *pâté de foie gras*—a process of "stuffing"—but without the delectable result.

I have the further grave charge to allege against the majority of day schools, that their work is so arranged that no possibility is provided for the pupils having the recreation afforded by School Games, because, in winter at all events, the hours of work are continued during the entire daylight. These unfortunate children thus grow up without the benign influence of school sports, and develop, in consequence, a distinct but most objectionable precocity. By thus forbidding games during so many months of the year, the taste for them languishes, and the vacations consequently tend to be spent in mere loafing, with resulting loss to character and vigour.

I would make an "Eight Hours' Bill" for schools on a scale adjusted to the various ages, the eight hours being applicable only to the senior pupils. At the present time even the younger are set to work for this period, which is sometimes prolonged for the elder ones. Of course they do not actually and legitimately exert