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THE MERITS OF MERIT SYSTEMS

PARKER L. NORTON¹

"According to statistics" the majority of children even today are still "dragged up" in their own homes, and their own parents continue to enjoy in true patriarchal fashion the pleasures of inflicting punishment while devoutly assuring both child and themselves that "this hurts me more than it does you."

However, many thousands of children are guided through the plastic years of infancy and youth by others than those adults biologically—and often accidentally—responsible for the present generation.

That this vicarious parenthood may not be wholly a loss is attested through our increasing realization that parental wisdom is by no means a heaven-sent instinct tucked into the original wrapper with each wailing cherub. Foster homes are multiplying. Foster parents, under the guidance of trained welfare workers, are doubtless learning as rapidly as "real" parents (perhaps more so!) how to encourage and guide the eager explorations of developing childhood.

In many of our child caring institutions, on the other hand, discipline still includes the traditional, though largely discredited, annoyances of petty rules and regulations, stereotyped routine, compulsory religious duties, military training, unquestioning obedience, monotonous and disagreeable work as a penalty, and the many other irritants of outward compulsion which the Mussolini mentality still fondly hopes will somehow magically result in the virgin birth of an inward guide.

Of course, mere increase in numbers adds tremendously to the problems of group control. Even one small youngster can be very much of a puzzle to his immediate ancestors—ask any worried parent of an only child. Twins, or two children of different ages, are capable of producing many more than twice the number of problems which can originate with one. Three youthful question marks demand at least nine times as many answers as any one of them investigating life on his own. In brief, it is safe to say that group disciplinary difficulties are not merely successive addends increasing according to the number of children; these difficulties multiply by

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themselves and by reacting on each other at an alarming geometrical ratio, and only the social worker who is something of a professional mathematician can hope to survive as the directing genius of a modern children's institution.

Among other attempts at lessening the complexities of institutional discipline are the various types of so-called merit systems, which in practice nearly always become systems of demeriting. The origin of this method is generally credited to Captain Alexander Maconochie while he was in charge of prisoners at Norfolk Island, a penal colony for English convicts situated in mid-Pacific about a thousand miles east of Australia. Here, in 1840, this official suggested the elimination of the determinate sentence and introduced the beginnings of commutation of sentence for good behavior. "Every convict . . . had a certain number of marks set against him which he had to redeem before being liberated. These marks were to be earned by deportment, labor and study and the more rapidly they were acquired the more speedy the release."² These reforms received but slight support in Australasia at that time, but were taken up by reformers in England and presumably spread from this source to the United States.

During the last few decades merit systems, or their equivalents, have existed in many of our leading public and private institutions for dependent and delinquent children. In boys' schools, girls' schools, mixed schools, orphan asylums, industrial schools, training schools, "modern" schools and schools quite otherwise, old-time reformatories and up-to-date cottage plants, there are found various forms of "credit systems" upon which is based the child's length of stay in the institution, as well as the quantity and quality of offenses for which he is punished.

In 1923 there were in institutions for dependents 140,312 children, this including reports from 1558 institutions. In 1927 there were 84,317 delinquent children confined in 173 reformatories.³ These two groups comprise 224,629 children in 1711 institutions, not including the thousands, neither dependent nor delinquent, confined for other reasons, such as physical and mental handicaps. How many of these children are guided through their institutional lives by some form of merit system is not definitely known, but certainly enough so that an objective evaluation of the philosophy underlying this sys-

²Barnes, Harry Elmer: *The Story of Punishment*. Stratford, Boston, 1930.

³Hall, Fred S.: *Social Work Year Book*. Russel Sage Foundation, New York, 1929.

tem, together with the mechanisms, methods and results may be considered of some possible value in the field of child welfare.

This mode of group control naturally divides into two parts; the standards of conduct gradually built up by the institution, and the methods of correction applied to the child when he violates these standards. These corrective measures are sometimes in the form of fines to be earned through work, the theory evidently being that the child "in earning money to pay his fine, punishes himself." Other schools have a "wage system" through which work hours are metered to the non-observer of regulations. In several places "hard work" is a means of punishment, though without any definite wages per hour. In one "training" center it is necessary for the child to "earn six thousand merits" before he can petition for release. At another school there is a "credit badge system—each inmate wears a numbered and visible badge which shows at a glance his advancement toward parole." In at least two state schools there is a "system of earning so many credits and when the required number is earned application for parole is made."

In one institution there is set up a dual system consisting of both fines and demerits. Either a demerit or a fine, as seems best, may be given as punishment for misconduct; the fines are "worked off" through extra institutional duties, while the demerits accumulate and may result at the end of the month in a repetition or demotion of grade which in effect increases the length of residence of the child by one or more months. Provision is made for translating either demerits or fines into equivalent terms of the other, as well as for "skipping grades—by unusually good conduct." It is claimed by the management that "the length of time you (the child) live at (this institution) depends upon the earning of points, each day through your own efforts."

In another "training school" supported almost entirely by public funds this "training of the boys is accomplished in four ways—

"First, by religious instruction—

"Second, by scholastic instruction—

"Third, by vocational instruction—in which—all the work in the institution is done by boys—

"Fourth, by military instruction—a system (which) inculcates—respect for discipline."

"While in the awkward squad cadets are informed as to the house rules and carefully instructed as to their deportment while here.

"The regiment comprises the entire population, and our daily routine is based on and carried out according to the principles of military schools from reveille to taps.

"Authorization for your parole will depend—entirely upon the record that you make in the institution—as kept by officers, teachers and matrons.

"For infraction of the rules you may receive marks—

"If you are assigned to the discipline squad you will forfeit your next monthly visit and forfeit the class of honor. If you receive ten marks on one report or a total of ten marks within two consecutive weeks you will also forfeit the class of honor. When the class of honor is lost it cannot be regained except by continued good conduct for eight weeks, and the Committee will not consider for parole any boy who is not in the class of honor.

"Misconduct on your part, and making no effort or little effort to make any progress in your school or shop work, will lengthen the time you will remain in the institution. The more you misbehave and show indifference to your school or shop work, the longer it will take you to earn your parole. You will be expected to obey without questioning, any order given you by any officer, teacher, or matron, doing whatever may be given you to do promptly and cheerfully and in the best manner you can."

Through various studies many statistical facts are now known about the masses of children who annually enter our institutions, and through other studies something is known of the post-institutional careers of these children. There have been established fairly definite standards as to the physical equipment needed for large institutional groups; there have been selected from this group life certain phases, such as school facilities, for detailed analysis and suggestions as to improvement; at times, usually as a result of publicity given to illness or death or other unlooked for results of disciplinary routine, there have been staged brief investigations which led to the replacement of unfit personnel by others only slightly better qualified to deal with the technical problems of rewards and punishments. Very seldom, however, until recently, has there been any widespread attempt to question either the methods or goals of traditional discipline as still practiced in even the "best" of our child-caring institutions.

In an effort to discover what really does happen to a child during institutional residence, a partial survey was made of several hundred children living in a school where both fines and demerits are used as means of punishment. Through a study of the records there

was developed an "index" composed of the number of fines plus the number of monthly demotions resulting from accumulated demerits. By means of this index the children were arranged according to their "delinquency" and then divided into groups for purposes of comparison. On a given date these children had lived in this institution for periods varying from one month to 121 months, and under this system of discipline 80 per cent of them had had the lengths of their detention here increased by additions ranging from one month to 21 months at one demotion, the merit system automatically adding these amounts to the child's institutional life. During this same period 95 per cent of the children had been fined from one time to 98 times each. Combining demotions and fines left only three per cent who have thus far during their residence escaped both methods of punishment.

Fines are "worked off" at the rate of five cents per hour and the average child has thus far been fined a total of \$8.90, which means 178 hours of work done for disciplinary reasons. A fine of \$1.00 for "having cigarettes" does not seem like an extreme penalty till it is translated into terms of work; it means that the child must work for 20 hours at some job having little or no interest or vocational value for him, during time (perhaps the five Saturday afternoons following the offense) when some of his playmates are enjoying the "recreation hour."

In addition to fines, these children have been demoted an average of 4.4 times, each demotion involving an average loss of 2.4 grades, thus giving an aggregate average total for each child of 10.5 months added to the length of his institutional career.

No matter from what background of dependency or delinquency a child comes to an institution, he practically never comes on a voluntary basis. He enters more or less against his own desires and he hopes to leave as soon as possible. Whether he believes he is likely to remain for a longer or a shorter period, it is doubtless a definite shock to him when he first learns that through a violation of institutional rules this period has actually been extended one month. When the period is extended for two months the shock is at least doubled, for two months additional of institutional residence must seem a long time to a child eager to return to the comparative freedom of the non-institutional world. When this two months is doubled or tripled the emotional effect on the child quite possibly increases at a geometrical ratio; and when a child loses 12 grades

(or even more), an entire year or more of added residence, he may well be started on a career of hopeless defiance of all authority.

By comparing the "best" third of the children with the "worst" third, as determined by their "institutional delinquency" ratings on the index, it was seen that in the matter of age there is very little difference between the two groups, thus indicating that the child's reaction to institutional discipline is comparatively little affected by his age. The average Intelligence Quotient of the "best" group was 88.3, while that of the "worst" group was 87.8, a difference so slight as to be statistically negligible. In brief, the various factors tested for purposes of comparison show only slight differences between the two groups, with the exception of the length of institutional residence. This is found to increase in almost exact proportion with the increasing rate of delinquency, there being a correlation of 98.1 between the two factors.

This study clearly indicates that the average child tends to become a "delinquent," from an institutional point of view, in direct proportion to the number of months or years he is exposed to institutional restraints. This seems both a logical and an inescapable conclusion in view of the sequence of events leading up to this situation. This institution, like practically all others, has built up definitely established standards of behavior by which the conduct of the child is supposed to be regulated. The child himself is a developing personality interested in the active exploration of his environment, and often conforming only under protest to the requirements of this environment when it happens to conflict with his needs. A given need of the child is confronted with a given institutional regulation; the child violates this regulation in satisfying the need; he is punished by being demerited or fined; these demerits or fines accumulate and are translated into demotions of grades; these lost grades automatically increase the length of the child's residence in the institution; increased residence necessitates the meeting of further regulations; additional violations inevitably result; demerits and fines are again imposed; demotions follow; and thus the increased length of residence and the continued violation of rules form mutually causative factors tending to retain the child within the institutional circle.

The logical results of this system are to be found in the institutional careers of five boys found to have the highest ratings on the "delinquency index." The cases of these five boys were studied in detail and include a wide variety of factors thought to be typical of a large majority of the children in this institution, particularly with

regard to family background, institutional contacts, offenses against discipline and types of punishment.

One boy has been in this institution for 34 months, during which period he had lost 25 grades (months) in 12 demotions, been fined 98 times and has a total index rating of 123. A second boy has resided here for 44 months, lost 32 grades (months) in 17 demotions, been fined 94 times and has an index rating of 126. A third boy has lived here for 53 months, lost 54 grades (months) in 18 demotions, been fined 77 times and has an index rating of 131. A fourth boy here for 36 months has lost 51 grades (months) in seven demotions, been fined 82 times and has an index rating of 133. A fifth boy has lived here for 57 months, lost 66 grades (months) in 19 demotions, been fined 81 times and has a rating of 147 on the delinquency index, thus being the "worst" boy in the institution.

For the five boys in this group an average total of 224 offenses per boy has been punished by either fines or demerits during the average residence of 45 months, thus giving an average number of 5 offenses per month for each boy thus far during his institutional career. For about half of these offenses he "paid" by working an average of 15.5 hours per month for disciplinary reasons; for the other half of these offenses he "paid" through demotions and a resulting increase in the length of institutional residence. Briefly, on the basis of averages, each one of these five boys during each of his 45 months of residence thus far has been punished for some offense slightly oftener than once each week. About every six days he has been given a demerit slip, sent through the "squad line," and demerited or fined in the name of institutional discipline.

When a given offense is punished by a given official he does not necessarily or consciously consult any clear cut standard of institutional conduct which this particular deed may be thought to have violated. Being human, the official is much more likely to inflict punishment in accordance with the degree to which this act shocks his own standards of religion, morality or ethics; that is, the punishment is highly subjective and deals with the act rather than with the needs of the child. However, when a large number of offenses committed by a number of children over periods of many months are judged and punished by a number of officials, there will emerge from a grouping of these offenses around central tendencies a standard of conduct which may fairly be claimed to represent the disciplinary demands of the institution in question.

An objectively selected list comprising 1120 such offenses is

believed to include examples of a large majority of the violations of rules for which children in this institution are punished. Around the central theme of "*Work*" and its various implications appear such items as "careless work," "poor work," "late for work," "fooling with machine," "lazy," "playing during work hours," "sweeping dirt in corner," "not drying officer's dish," "refusing to work for" a given matron in charge of janitor duties, and "refusing to rub floors."

In the group of offenses comprising "*Carelessness*" there are included various "lost" articles ("comb," "spoon," "pencil"), "marking on wall," "breaking a window," breaking dishes ("cup," "bowl," "glass"), "tearing a towel," "picking flowers," and "soiling a book."

"*Disturbance*" includes "quarreling," "yelling," "loud talk," "disorder," "noisy," "teasing," "fooling around," "talking in line," "boisterous," "pillow fight," "ringing gong," "throwing water," "must be spoken to often," "racing," "continual nuisance," "throwing snowball," "throwing stones," "playing ball," "wrestling," "riding on a pig," and "barking like a dog."

Among the troubles of "*school life*" are those of "poor reciting," "being stubborn," "annoying," "discourteous to teacher," "disorderly in class," "laughing in school," "having chalk in pocket," "throwing spitballs," "wasting time," "idleness," "poor work in school," being "lazy in school," and being a "failure in his school work."

"*Disrespect*" takes many different forms of "being fresh," "acting saucy," "talking back," "grumbling over demerits," "being impudent," "kicking at table" over food, "profane language," "bad talk," "dirty conversation," being "vulgar," "arguing" with official and "using improper language." From the point of view of frequency of corporal punishment, disrespect for authority is the second most serious offense possible in this institution.

Among the offenses surrounding the care of "*Clothing*" are those of "having on no shirt," "wearing raincoat" of another boy, "tearing trousers" and other clothing, wearing "good" shoes when poor ones are supposed to be worn or the reverse, "poor care" of stockings, "not wearing underwear," forgetting to wear "slippers," "losing a tag" from clothing, omitting to hang clothing in "locker," and "wearing Sunday coat" at some unauthorized time.

Being "*Out of Bounds*" includes "being in a room" at some forbidden time, "being in the field," in the "hall," in the "boiler room," "on the road," playing "in the coal bin," being "downstairs" when he should have been up, "climbing a tree," "in the basement,"

"in the woods," "in the orchard," "using the front door" instead of the rear, and being on a "Staff path" forbidden to the children.

Acts of "*Disobedience*" include neglect to carry out orders, partial obedience only, "forgetting" of orders, "ringing bell at wrong time," "rising before being called," and breaking of "understood" rules even though no specific command may have been given.

The tabu on "*Smoking*" punishes the "having" of cigarettes, the "use" of them under any conditions of time or place (though many of the Staff smoke), the "being found with matches," and many similar restrictions. It is significant that corporal punishment is given more frequently for the violation of this rule than for any other offense.

While under "*Stealing*" there appear a few actual thefts or attempted thefts of "spoons" or "money," a large number of "stealing" entries specify the taking of a "shirt" or of "cigarettes" or of "cord" or of "clips," and an even larger group ranks as "stealing" or "theft" the taking of forbidden articles of food, such as "getting into the ice box," the taking of "raisins," "bananas," "bread," "apples," "carrots" from the garden, "sugar" and "cake."

"*Orderliness*" comprises the forbidden wearing of "shoes in the house," the failure to "put out his laundry," neglect to "hang up the towel," forgetting to follow the prescribed routine order of "getting his hair cut," "shoes" out of place, "bed" not made correctly, "coming to table dirty," "unwashed ears," wearing "shirt outside pants," "tie" not hung on rack, "paper" not in waste basket, failure to "comb hair," "locker" in poor order, and "clothing" not hung up properly.

For the "*Runaway*" which is successfully carried out there are the disciplinary cottage and similar punishments, while for the many other runaways which are discussed and planned there are the usual penalties of demerits or fines.

Reactions to the requirements of "*Band*" practice are seen in the offenses of being "late" to band, or "absent," or "leaving" after having once reported, or of staying and being "disorderly," or of wearing "band uniform on field" or some other unauthorized place, or of "losing band belt" or the "mouthpiece" to an instrument.

"*Religion*" is still in the compulsory stage at this institution, and among the youthful reactions are those of "not reporting" at the thrice-weekly chapel, "talking during the exercises," "disorderly during church," wearing "overalls in chapel," "throwing hymn books," and "playing his cornet on Sunday."

"*Military Drill*," another compulsory matter, is met by the child with instances of "missing drill," being "late at drill," "disorder in drill," "falling out of line" at drill, and the wearing of "uniform at work" and other unauthorized places.

Additional items include the giving of demerits for enuresis "because child is too lazy to get up," the demeriting of various forms of "lying," "cheating" and similar deceptions, and demerits for "lack of cooperation," "making a fool of himself" and "popping a cricket."

The very use of any type of this disciplinary system points to the existence of a psychologically unsound assumption concerning the unit equality, and therefore the possible mathematical combination, of these widely differing offenses. In adding demerited offenses for the purpose of determining monthly demotions or translating into fines, it is necessarily assumed that any demerit or fine is a "fair" punishment for a given offense committed by a given child under given conditions, and that any ten such demerits, or other number, in one week or month are a fair equivalent of any other ten demerits given to this child during another week or month. The net result (each monthly demotion) is nothing more than an arithmetical addition of widely unlike and necessarily subjective personal opinions concerning the myriad activities of a highly unique and infinitely complex human mechanism reacting at successive intervals to a thousand differing environments. An endless piling up of intangibles cannot by any miracle produce a tangible product; there is quite evidently no such thing as "a" demerit, and disciplinary judgments based on the merit system of group control are obviously just as accurate as the technical knowledge of human nature possessed by the person giving these judgments—and no more so. Hence the obvious folly of trusting the solution of disciplinary problems to a person whose methods of group and individual control are limited, for instance, by either military coercion or theological fears.

A brief inspection of these institutional offenses clearly shows the artificial nature of a large majority of them. In the non-institutional world it is evident that any child tends to be as *careless* as is any other young animal with the rights and property of others. Sooner or later almost any child develops a sense of *orderliness* as an incidental result of his own discovery of its practical convenience in a crowded sphere. To a healthy child *clothing* is often another "necessary evil" of civilization to be endured as patiently as possible. To the adolescent child of either city or country the *boundaries* of his wanderings tend to be those of his own choosing and physical

endurance. Unquestioning *obedience* is no longer a virtue in a democratic social order where the state requires that parental authority be exercised in a "wise" manner and for the "best interests of the child." Our notions of *respect* are also in process of change, and we are beginning to realize that even outspoken youth is likely to give respect where this attitude toward the adult world is really merited. Every child is at times a normally *disturbing* element in the complacent calm of his elders. For every person, child or adult, *lying* is a psychologically sound reaction in any situation where deception seems to offer a means of retreat from threatened danger. To a large majority of both boys and girls of today *smoking* has become a symbol of partial escape from parental or other authoritative control and is often used as such. The peripatetic vacuum of growing childhood is likely to help itself to food when hungry, whether duly authorized or not, but hardly thinks of these activities as *stealing*. If a child living at home happens to like *music* he may join some musical organization, but his relationships with it are on a voluntary basis. With the discovery that enuresis and many other *physical ailments* are largely the outward symptoms of inner emotional conflicts, there is a growing tendency to deal with the causes of these conflicts rather than endlessly punish the symptoms. When a child *runs away* from home or any other environment this is now believed to indicate the necessity of modifying the environment as well as studying and treating the child.

In a world where war and the preparations for war are clearly recognized as one of the major causes of the threatened bankruptcy of modern civilization, it is surely questionable to find any taint of a *military atmosphere* in an institution supposedly engaged in the scientific treatment of maladjusted childhood.

Enough is now known about the origins of *religion* so that even a slightly modern world no longer gives credence to its supernatural claims. Compulsion in the religious field is everywhere yielding place to a voluntary participation by the individual, if he happens to be interested in this particular activity; and the supposed values of compulsory religious training are gradually disappearing in the light of mental hygiene. According to a recent newspaper article the chaplain of West Point "condemned compulsory chapel as attempting an automatic solution of the religious problem." Even the Catholic Church is now following modern trends in this field; "The present drift in our Catholic child caring institutions seems to be very definitely away from obligatory—(religious observances).—

If the habit of attending religious services depends upon compulsion, discipline and bells, the chances are that when the child leaves the institution—the habit itself will die for lack of stimulation.—Our institutions exist for the children, and not the children for the institutions.”⁴

Psychological values in the *educational* field are also rapidly changing. We are beginning to realize that the only possible basis of a sound educational philosophy is the direct or indirect interest of the child in a given subject, and with this modern attitude penetrating the scholastic world there must be discarded a large part of the existing methods and goals of academic education.

The present depression is emphasizing anew the dual values of *work*; first, as a means of creative expression and, secondarily, as a means of livelihood. The compulsory exposure of a child, for disciplinary reasons, to weeks and months of uninteresting and unremunerative work can hardly be considered an efficient method of developing within that child an intelligent urge to take his place in the world as an industrious and productive citizen.

In brief, the large majority of these institutional offenses and their respective punishments rests upon a degree of limitation and repression of childhood activities quite out of harmony with the modern science of child welfare.

Any list of conclusions within the limits of this article must be both brief and tentative. First, is the obvious suggestion that the directing body of any child caring institution should include in its membership a substantial proportion of professional social workers, both men and women, having first hand knowledge of childhood problems and modern methods of solution.

Second, it would seem desirable that for institutions so largely subsidized by public funds as is the case in many instances, there should be a larger degree of public control than now exists.

Third, the intake of every institution should be controlled by a person professionally equipped to admit only those children who are in definite need of the specialized service which this institution can give, and who cannot be given suitable care by any non-institutional agency. No longer can an institution meet with public approval merely by “holding out a welcome to any poor child in need of a home”; the giving of this type of care may be exceedingly harmful to the child in spite of the good intentions of his benefactors, as

⁴Cooper, John M.: *Children's Institutions*. Dolphin Press, Phil., 1931.

"Even at best the institutional experience is an undesirable one, for there is a stigma attached even in good institutions."⁵

Fourth, the disciplinary system of an institution should include only a very few highly essential regulations, and this minimum of requirements must satisfy both the interests and the needs of the growing child.

Fifth, all disciplinary matters should be handled by or under the direction of a psychiatrist or a person with psychiatric training. This is the one existing profession which is technically equipped to deal with both deeds and motives of the human mechanism.

Additional suggestions which are doubtless already functioning in various modern institutions include something in the way of student self-government; the elimination of all forms of corporal punishment; the discontinuance of disciplinary cottages, cells, solitary confinement and similar brutalizing methods; a constructive attitude toward the problem of smoking, as perhaps a "permissive smoking room"; a much greater emphasis on professional supervision of group recreation; definite sex instruction for these children who are so soon to be the parents of the next generation; and the freeing of Sunday from the frequent puritanical restrictions which still persist in many institutions.

The institution of the future, and even of the immediate future, is likely to be one in which outward disciplinary compulsions will play a much less important part than at present. Neither quantity nor quality of other features in institutional life can hope to offset the definitely harmful effects of our traditional institutional discipline, such as still exists in many places. Given directors with a professional point of view, intake so strictly controlled as to produce a homogeneous group, individual study of the needs of each child in this group, a minimum of disciplinary "don'ts" administered by a professionally qualified person—and it seems quite possible that something of constructive value can be salvaged from the various forms of disciplinary systems which still handicap many otherwise excellent institutions.

⁵Adler, Herman M.: *The Work of Institutions in the Prevention of Delinquency*. *The Journal of Juvenile Research*, January, 1931.