

As might naturally be supposed, the attendance of the younger children has been most affected by sickness, and the result of the examination in the lower classes has been most unsatisfactory. In several instances the whole of the scholars presented in Standards I. and II. have failed to reach the requirements, and it is very discouraging to see that there is no diminution in the large proportion of children who fail to reach Standard I. After making every allowance for the exceptional difficulties teachers have had this year to contend with, it must be admitted that there are vital defects in the course of instruction when out of 2,859 scholars examined 1,107, or 38·7 per cent., failed to reach Standard I.; in other words, that this large proportion could not read and spell easy words of one syllable, write on slates the letters of the alphabet, and do very elementary addition. The reason is, however, not far to seek. The syllabus is so exacting that the head-master's ability and energy are fully taxed to cover the work of the upper standards, and the younger classes are left, with very little supervision, to the management of pupil-teachers and incompetent assistants. I use the term incompetent advisedly, for of the twenty assistant teachers at present in the Board's employ only nine are certified, and the greatest difficulty is experienced in securing the services of assistants with even the most limited knowledge of school work. It is admitted on all hands that the most skilled teaching is required to do justice to the infant and junior classes; and all who have tested the capacity of children must agree that if the instruction in the early stages were thoroughly efficient, the average age at which the standards are passed would be considerably reduced, and the work in the higher classes would be far more intelligently done. At present scholars pass into the upper standards with the barest rote-knowledge that can secure a pass, and with their general intelligence and reasoning powers in no way developed. If the defect is afterwards remedied, it can only be at an altogether unnecessary expenditure of time and labour. In the majority of cases, however, the natural result is that the comprehensive work of the higher standards, in place of securing the broad, intelligent instruction intended, degenerates to rote-work and cram. I am fully persuaded that we should hear very few complaints of the difficulty of meeting the requirements of the higher standards if efficient instruction were secured to the junior classes.

The work in the upper classes is more satisfactory, and shows fair improvement. Forty scholars passed Standard VI., as compared with 12 in 1880; and, though there is a falling-off in Standard V., the numbers passing Standards IV. and III. have steadily increased.

In my examinations and reports I have, as far as possible, pointed out the cause of defects, and suggested means of improvement. It is, therefore, unnecessary here to enter upon a lengthened description or criticism of the work in the several subjects. I may, however, draw attention to a few points affecting the schools generally.

Reading is generally sufficiently fluent to secure a pass, but devoid of special merit, there being often a total want of intelligence or expression. Although much of the fault lies with the teacher, I am persuaded that the prime cause of the defect is the use of a single set of reading books. In the lower classes the lessons are practically known by heart, and the reading becomes purely mechanical, calling for no effort of the mind; and in the higher classes the constant repetition of the same pieces cramps the intelligence, leads to a distaste for reading, and is a loss of valuable time. Two sets of reading books should be in use in every school, and, where possible, a scientific, geographical, or historical reader should be provided for the higher standards.

Spelling is generally very successful where it is examined orally, but it is not uncommon to find classes able to spell all the difficult words in a paragraph but quite unable to write the passage from dictation. The sense is often obscured or entirely destroyed by the misuse and omission of words, and a total disregard of the principles of punctuation.

Writing is often the best-taught subject in the school. I have insisted on correct—or, rather, systematic—formation of letters from the earliest stages; and the books of the higher classes are, as a rule, thoroughly neat and well written. A large portion of the examination in Standards III. to VI. is taken on paper, supplemented by oral questions. While I have seldom to condemn the papers on the score of neatness, I have constantly to complain of the amount produced in the given time. The laboured style of necessity adopted in the copy-book is continued for too long a time, and the writing of the most advanced scholars is generally far too large for a commercial hand.

Arithmetic is subject to the greatest variation, and may, perhaps, be taken as the best test of the quality of the instruction, and of the ability of the teacher. I am happy to say that, in a good proportion of our schools, the subject is thoroughly well taught, the mechanical work is accurate, and the principles well understood. In other cases the simple examples are accurately worked, but the scholars are unable to apply the principles of the rules to the solution of such problems as might be expected to occur in actual experience. In all the higher standards I have required an intelligent appreciation of principles, and, as a necessary test, have invariably given a number of questions in the form of problems. Thus, the question, "If a horse travels ten miles an hour, how long will it take him to go seven miles," may be worked mechanically; but let the question be varied thus: "From Geraldine to Winchester is seven miles; if I travel at the rate of ten miles an hour, at what time must I start from Geraldine to catch the twelve o'clock train at Winchester?" and the value of the instruction is fully tested.

The principles of grammar, as shown by parsing and analysis, are, as a rule, well taught; but it is much to be regretted that in only a few schools is the knowledge thus gained put to its legitimate use in composition. In examining the papers one can scarcely credit that the composition is written by the same scholars who worked the answers in other subjects. The teaching of composition presents considerable difficulty, especially in its earlier stages, and the results of the labour expended are not soon apparent. Teachers become disheartened, and the subject is neglected as being beyond the scholars' capacity; but its importance justifies its position in the syllabus, and claims for it systematic treatment in every standard.

History and geography have very much improved. I am pleased to find a growing appreciation of oral teaching, and the free use of maps and black-board diagrams for both subjects.