

RECITATION.—Unless this subject be better taught than it is at present, and unless a better selection of pieces to be committed to memory be made, it would be just as well if recitation were suffered to drop quietly out of our school-course. After enduring patiently much execrable recitation for many years, I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that a large proportion of our teachers can neither recite decently themselves, nor, as a natural consequence, teach others. The unaccentuated gabble that not only passes muster, but is listened to by teachers with complacency, on both inspection and examination days, is most disheartening. The extenuating plea that fully half of the pieces included in the reading-books as poetry do not rise to the level of even decent verse, avails but little when the majority of the verses chosen by the teachers themselves for the children are taken from the pure doggerel that still finds a large place even in our most modern reading-books. “The Two Crossing-sweepers” and “Little Jim” evidently possess a strange fascination for some members of a class that presumably has a certain tincture of letters.

GRAMMAR.—Judged by the performances of even our most advanced scholars, their teachers would appear to have come to the conclusion somewhat unanimously that formal grammar is of comparatively slight practical importance, and may therefore be almost entirely disregarded. Two examples will serve to show what I mean. Not one out of every four candidates for the Fifth Standard could answer with any approach to accuracy the following question: “How do you distinguish the active from the passive voice? Write two sentences exemplifying the use of each voice.” Three out of four of the Sixth Standard candidates were quite unable to comply with the demand for “three sentences, containing respectively an intransitive, an impersonal, and a frequentative verb.” (The third portion of this question was indeed withdrawn towards the close of my examinations, as being hopelessly out of reach.)

SPELLING.—The unacquaintance with words in daily use—even as exhibited by the most forward scholars—of which I complained in last year’s report, was more glaringly shown this year by my substituting extracts from newspapers of the day for passages from popular authors. Not only was a large proportion of our brightest scholars quite at sea as to the meaning of such words as “surplus,” “deficit,” and “finance,” but these words were miserably misspelt, even after the meaning of each had been carefully explained beforehand by the examiner. There would seem to be something grievously impractical in a system that lands our best scholars in such a slough of incompetence as this. No one looks for perfect specimens of English prose in the hastily-penned columns of a daily paper, but a large proportion of the every-day reading of every one but a hermit must nowadays be gotten from our newspapers, and he who persistently neglects what has been aptly termed “history in the making” does so at his own imminent peril. To sum up the matter on lower but very intelligible practical grounds, the boy who (in this district at least) never opens a newspaper will probably be plucked for bad spelling. Every possible device should be resorted to in order to extend the very limited vocabulary of our children, for a scholar can scarcely be expected to spell aright a word that he has hardly ever met with, and as to the meaning of which he can but make a guess. It must, though, be admitted that it is no easy task for an examiner to determine how far the failure of a scholar to explain, however crudely, the meaning of a word arises from pure ignorance, and how far from lack of power of expression.

ARITHMETIC continues to receive quite as much attention as it is entitled to. My observation of the teachers’ methods of teaching arithmetic has led me to conclude that, as a rule, they explain thoroughly a subject that they thoroughly understand, and that our children, on leaving school, do, for the most part, carry away with them such a sound knowledge of this art as ought, in after-years, to serve them in good stead.

ELEMENTARY SCIENCE (the text-book used being Paul Bert’s well-known manual) is a most popular study, and is taught in a most satisfactory fashion.

The plan of teaching **GEOGRAPHY** and **HISTORY** concurrently, recommended in my last report as being both a saving of time and a help to both of these kindred subjects, has been adopted in several schools in the case of the upper classes.

DRAWING, on the whole, is fairly well taught, having regard to the comparatively limited portion of the school-day that can be spared for this subject without unduly trenching upon such indispensable matters as reading or writing.

How our teachers will fare under the enormously-increased demands of the new syllabus—which appears to be framed upon the town-bred assumption that the majority of our children are to spend much of their future lives in handling pencil and compasses, instead of axe and spade—it is not difficult to predict. Either they will conscientiously strive to carry out the programme in its entirety, to the certain neglect of the more practical portions of an elementary education—a course that no Inspector will tolerate—or they will teach just as much drawing as can be compassed within the hour and a half, or two hours at the utmost, that can be wedged into any time-table drawn up with a due sense of proportion.

I subjoin the usual brief summary of my opinion of the general state of each school at the date of my last examination. [Not reprinted.]

The Chairman, Education Board, Nelson.

I have, &c.,
W. C. HODGSON.