

V.—STATISTICS OF CLASSIFICATION.

			Standard IV. and upwards.	Standards I., II., and III.	Preparatory Division.	Mean of Average Age, Standards I. to VI.
						Yrs. mos.
1886	...	...	17·1	45·5	37·4	11 10
1887	...	...	18·2	45·9	36·0	11 9
1888	...	...	19·3	45·9	34·7	11 8
1889	...	...	20·4	44·6	35·0	11 8
1890	...	...	22·4	44·8	32·3	11 8
1891	...	...	24·4	44·3	31·3	11 7
1892	...	...	26·1	43·9	30·0	11 6
1893	...	...	28·2	42·3	29·5	11 6
1894	...	...	30·1	41·2	28·7	11 5
1895	...	...	31·4	40·8	27·8	11 5

The figures in the tables referring to pass-subjects show generally an improvement, if the mere success in passing the children through standard tests is to be regarded as such; but we do not desire to lay much stress on this feature, since the conditions have been slightly altering in favour of greater facility. Generally we have no reason to suppose any material alteration in the character of the instruction the children are receiving, and on the whole we are quite satisfied that in its teachers the Board possesses a body of earnest and capable public servants, whose personal character exercises a good influence over those in their charge, and whose professional duties are carried out with as much zeal and (amid many difficulties) with as much efficiency as in any other branch of the public service.

Of the principal subjects taught, reading necessarily occupies a foremost place in importance, since it provides the means by which improvement is chiefly effected when school days have come to a close. It opens wide the portals of knowledge and rational entertainment, and places the humble toiler for a daily wage on a level with those more favoured by worldly circumstances in starting the race of life. Unfortunately, this is just the subject in which our schools have been able to do least in the mental equipment of the bulk of their attendants. With an infinity of pains and daily lessons for a series of years, a child at the Fourth Standard stage is able to read with fluency and fair comprehension a familiar class-book of average difficulty; but it is more than doubtful whether the power acquired is sufficient to enable a boy after leaving school at this stage to do more than make out with difficulty some passages from a newspaper, and it certainly falls far short of the ease and unconscious ability which leave the mind free to appreciate the mental attitude of the writer. The teacher in this matter is scarcely to blame. In the initial stages the irregularities of the language make systematic training in the recognition of words necessarily more or less imperfect; the ordinary vocabulary of children in their spoken language is very limited, and determined mainly by their home surroundings, and the range of their personal experience gives many of them a very imperfect grasp of expressions which carry their ideas beyond the narrow horizon of their daily life.

Much, however, may be done to improve matters, and among the first of the expedients to be suggested is a wider range of reading. We are sure that teachers would find it quite as easy to get through two reading-books in the lower stages in the year as it has been found to get through one; and when the incubus of a spelling test is removed from the second reader we have good reason to believe that the task is even easier, while the advantage of more varied practice still remains as the basis of further development. In the two highest classes we think the pupils of every school ought to be able to read readily at sight any book of ordinary difficulty presented as a test, and to secure this proficiency nothing can be better than the formation of a school stock of several sets of the readers now issued in such abundance and excellence of execution by a number of publishers. Without, however, going quite so far as to apply this opinion to the annual examinations, so long as "pass" conditions prevail, we should be satisfied for the present if the choice of two reading-books were here also offered to the Inspector for his annual test. In the lower classes we are glad to say a substantial number of good schools has for the last year or two adopted the plan of alternative readers with the happiest results. A few have also done so in all classes, and it only remains that the practice should be made authoritative and general. The issue of the new Government reader now gives an excellent opportunity of extending the practice at a very moderate cost.

Arithmetic comes next in order of importance to reading. It occupies a large share of the pupil's school time and of the teacher's attention. Daily, during practically the whole course of a pupil's attendance at school, one and a quarter to one and a half hours are given to "sums," and the teacher's reputation for successful work depends largely on the general accuracy or skill he secures in the subject. It is well that successful teaching in arithmetic should be rated high. Apart from the question of its practical utility, good arithmetic cannot be secured without at the same time exercising qualities in both teacher and pupil that on the one hand are essential to good service in any sphere, and on the other play an important part in the child's mental and even moral training. There is, however, much reason to fear that in our system of education this subject, and other features which, like it, are of a mechanical type, occupy too large a space in the teacher's mental horizon, and that elements of culture springing from the refining influence of an active intelligence in close association with growing minds have been too often regarded, if the matter has been thought about at all, as not seriously within the scope of the elementary-school teacher's