

The total number of children, including those who had previously passed the Sixth Standard examination, shows very little variation. The number in the preparatory class is also very nearly the same as in 1896, or 27 per cent. of the whole, the average proportion of the preparatory class throughout the colony as shown by the Inspectors being 30 per cent. Last year we pointed out that in this district the proportion in the preparatory class was considerably reduced, being in fact much lower than it had previously been. This we recorded with pleasure, as it indicated that a larger proportion of our children were in standard classes—that is, were sufficiently advanced to have received some at least of the rudiments of education. The decrease in the ratio that the preparatory class bears to the whole does not prove that the number of young children in the district is diminished, as a return of the number of children under a certain age, say, eight years, would clearly show, but is to some extent an evidence, however slight, of intellectual growth. The average age of passing the different standard examinations is one or two months higher in each class except Standard IV., where it is unaltered, so that the mean of average age, 11 years 4 months, is still very low and much below the mean for the colony as last recorded, 11 years 7 months. In this connection we must call the attention of teachers to the necessity for exercising the greatest care in entering the ages of pupils upon the examination schedules. In several schools, for the most part badly conducted, we found that teachers had made very careless entries in this respect. Some of the mistakes were due to badly kept admission-registers or careless copying without checking by inquiry from the children themselves. The errors made would, if undetected, have been sufficient to vitiate the whole of the returns under this head.

The number of children over eight years of age and yet considered unfit for presentation in Standard I. was 209. The reasons assigned for keeping them back were in sixty-six cases irregularity of attendance, in fifty-seven shortness of school life, and in eighty-one exceptional dulness, while for five others we can find no satisfactory reason recorded.

The pass-list this year shows a decided improvement in the two higher standards, Fifth and Sixth, the total number of passes being over 80 per cent. of the number present in standards. This, as a numerical estimate of efficiency, is a fairly satisfactory result, when we consider that no allowance is made for the irregularity, illness, or dulness of individual scholars. Though in general results it has been a year of progress, there are in all twenty-two schools which failed to satisfy the examiners. In these barely half—in some cases much less than half—of those examined by the Inspectors succeeded in passing the standard examinations. In nine instances the teachers were newly appointed, and could not be held entirely responsible for the shortcomings of their scholars, and in three others irregular attendance, for which we honestly think the teachers were not responsible, was evidently the primary cause, but for the rest an excuse cannot so readily be found. Four reports were considered of so damaging a nature that the special attention of the Committees concerned was drawn to them.

We, as usual, append a short criticism of the way in which the different subjects in the syllabus are treated.

Reading.—Though this subject is generally very well taught so far as the preparation of a prescribed book is concerned, we are not yet fully satisfied with the amount of literary training which this represents. By examining Standards I., II., and III. from two books we have at last induced the general preparation of a double course of reading and spelling throughout these classes. Next year we propose to extend this practice to Standard IV., allowing a slight relaxation of difficulty in the spelling and dictation tests for Standard III., which we have found on trial to be a little too severe when compared with those applied in the higher standards, while in Standard VI. we intend to be more exacting. For reading and spelling a similar plan of work should be adopted in the preparatory classes, in which, for a single course of about two years' duration, we expect at least the following or their equivalents to be read in succession: The "Little Primer"; the "Little Reader," Part I.; the "Little Reader," Part II.; and at least half of the "Royal Star Reader," Standard I. While all schools should take a second course of similar books as well, there is no reason why in our infant schools, and in every one in which more than two teachers are employed, a third course should not in addition be taken. For the children in Standards V. and VI., who should be capable of appreciating to some extent a literary treat, some teachers persist in providing a very meagre bill of fare—the "Royal Star Reader" only. In these cases we propose to examine the reading from previously unseen tests. The use of extra Readers of less difficulty but of an interesting and instructive character, to be used for practice merely, and not necessarily to be prepared, has been urged for several years past, but as yet with very little result. With suitable books, silent reading, if nothing further were attempted, might be encouraged, and a taste for reading so cultivated. In England, school newspapers and magazines are being largely employed with the same object, a practice that might well be followed in this country. The pupils, after all, should be taught to read, and the getting-up of a certain text-book is only a means to an end.

Arithmetic.—Far less trouble was experienced this year in this subject, which to the majority of children is probably the most difficult in the syllabus, as it has certainly proved in this district for some years past. The total number of failures in any subject is still the greatest in arithmetic, being almost equal to those in any other two subjects combined, while spelling, geography, and composition next in order claim the most victims. The foundation of the trouble is laid in the preparatory classes, where we often find even addition tables neglected. The number of failures in arithmetic expressed as percentage of the number present in each standard and compared with last year's return reads as follows:—

			Standard VI. Per Cent.	Standard V. Per Cent.	Standard IV. Per Cent.	Standard III. Per Cent.
1896 ...	...	...	69	56	37	26
1897 ...	...	...	39	45	39	28

It will be seen from this table that though the figures show somewhat worse numerical results in Standards III. and IV., these are more than compensated by the marked improvement in Standards V. and VI. The figures bear out the impression we had received from the perusal of the