

It is not just in the post-primary school that the range of ability in each class has become wider. In the Minister's report last year (pp. 5-6) figures were quoted to show that, as a result of the policy of promoting children in the primary school on the basis of age and physical and emotional development as well as of academic attainment, there has been less and less retardation over the past thirty years. In 1916 only 6.1 per cent. of the primary-school population were in Form II; in 1946, 9.7 per cent. were there. Children are no longer kept, forlorn "dunces," in Standard 4, until they are old enough to leave school, but, even though their arithmetic and English may only be at the Standard 4 level, they are permitted to go on to Form II, or even Form III, to work on academic subjects at their own rate, and to get what benefit they can from practical and social activities with children of their own age. Since the abolition of the Proficiency Examination in 1936 the practice of promoting on the basis of age has increased; in 1946 there was 16 per cent. more of the primary-school population in higher standards, age for age, than in 1936.

In this respect, it may be mentioned, New Zealand has not gone as far as Great Britain, where in the primary schools it is now quite regular to promote on the basis of age alone, independently of academic attainment. It is also common practice in the United States of America. Although the policy is, I think, educationally sound, at least to the extent practised in New Zealand, it must be stressed that it affects the average level of academic attainment in the upper standards of the primary school in the same way that free admission to post-primary education lowers the average standard in the secondary school. There are now many children in Form II who twenty years ago would not have passed Standard 4.

It is these changes in the composition of the upper classes of the primary school and the lower forms of the post-primary school that make it so difficult to compare in any statistical way the average standards of work attained now with those achieved in the same classes ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. The classes are the same only in the sense that they have the same names. It is a fact that employers must appreciate when selecting staff. Thirty years ago some employers would select junior office staff from young people with only a Form II education, and might well have secured boys and girls of good average intelligence. Now, with rare exceptions, only the very dullest cease formal education at Form II. A boy who had completed Form IV in 1917 could, in general, be relied upon to be well above the average in native ability, since he belonged to a selected group; in 1947, as we have seen, he might be barely average, since most of the school population reach that level. I am convinced that many of the complaints from employers as to the poor standards of entrants to offices come from a failure to realize the change that has taken place in the constitution of post-primary schools. The difficulty is intensified at present by the shortage of juvenile labour and by the opportunities in the professions for really able boys and girls. Business houses are often driven to accept almost any applicant who offers, and in some cases may then expect from him results comparable with those given by a carefully selected youth of an earlier period.

There is need also for a full understanding in the post-primary schools of the implications of the changes in distribution of school population. They have been accustomed, for example, to expect pupils to enter Form III with a reasonably complete grasp of the fundamental tool subjects. That is still the ideal; but the fact must be faced that the least able group of the 85 per cent. who go on to post-primary school are of a type that will always find great difficulty with the three Rs. This group may need additional formal teaching of these subjects even in Form III, though this has not commonly been regarded as one of the functions of a post-primary school.