

Undoubtedly the relatively slow growth of intelligence, of educative power, and of thoroughness in the teaching of the public schools is in chief measure due to a cause which teachers and Inspectors alike are impotent to remedy—to the overburdened course of instruction that is imposed by the Education Department. It is indisputable that our course of study is much heavier than that required in the elementary schools of Great Britain, France, and Germany, and in my judgment a substantial curtailment of it is one of our crying needs. To me it was a great disappointment to find that the new arrangements had made no provision in this direction. It is one of the chief misfortunes of our system of public education that the officers of the Education Department are not in closer contact with the practical working of the great machine they direct. Such defects as the overweighting of the prescribed syllabus cannot easily be brought home to them without a more intimate acquaintance with its practical working. To demand too wide a course of study inevitably works against thoroughness and intelligence of teaching, by preventing pupils and teachers from giving to the more indispensable subjects the time and attention needful for their sound study and real mastery. Any expert who carefully examines a school time-table cannot fail to recognise that we are frittering away our energies by attempting too much.

Now what is the scope of the curtailment that can be approved by those who desire to see the evil of an overburdened syllabus removed?

In the first place, history might cease to be a subject of examination and take rank as a reading subject. This means that a suitable reading-book in history would be read through in addition to the other Readers now in use, by each class that now receives special instruction in history, and that the language and matter would be questioned on and explained as in other reading-lessons. This change I would heartily recommend, and I believe the suggested treatment would do more to foster patriotism and a real interest in the story of our country than is possible under present conditions.

In the second place, the higher parts of the arithmetic course might be greatly curtailed without any disadvantage. I would recommend the entire omission of compound interest, present worth and true discount, stocks, the metric system, and the proposed decimal system of coinage. All these rules except the last two are applications of the principle of proportion, with which and its applications the curtailed course would make pupils perfectly familiar, for they would still study simple and compound proportion, simple interest, percentages, and proportional parts. Young persons familiar with these rules should have no difficulty in learning the rules omitted, if they should afterwards have occasion to do so. Then, the treatment of decimal fractions should be greatly curtailed. The addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of easy finite decimals, the reduction of vulgar fractions to decimals correctly expressed, and the meaning of the notation used in writing infinite decimals—that is all that seems to me needful or useful to teach. The briefer course just indicated would afford great relief in the higher standards, and yet leave a curriculum of the highest utility and completeness for the needs of practical life and the ends of mental discipline. The curtailment recommended would make it possible to teach the elements of book-keeping in Standards V. and VI. without making the whole course more onerous than it is now.

In any rearrangement of the syllabus the courses of instruction in grammar and geography need to be carefully revised. Nothing more arbitrary and pedantic than the present geography course in Standard III., and, in part, in Standard IV., can be conceived. A wider and more connected, but not a more minute, treatment of the whole subject is needful. Our pupils are taught about the Apennine Mountains, but need never hear of the great and rich plain of Lombardy; of the Carpathians, but need never hear of the plain of Hungary; and so on. They learn the names of a few rivers and mountains of the several continents in one class, of their great seaports in another, and of their countries and larger towns in another. We may well ask how such a course of study can forward intelligent training. A full syllabus of the work in each class should be issued by the Department to all schools, and it would be well if an official text-book were prepared.

In grammar, the topics that are helpful in connection with composition should receive earlier and greater prominence. The recognition, and the classification according to use, of phrases and later of clauses, the easier principles of sentence structure, and the arrangement of phrases and clauses, should form a clearly graduated part of the course. Parsing, especially of the verb, should be simplified.

I have written on these topics because there are indications that the Minister of Education may undertake a revision of the syllabus at an early date, and a knowledge of the opinions of Inspectors who are in daily contact with the working of the public schools may haply have some grain of weight in determining its direction. In any case, such expressions of Inspectors' views may help to enlighten public opinion on the important questions discussed.

I need only further note a few points culled from the reports of my colleagues.

Both Mr. Mulgan and Mr. Grierson draw attention to the careless supervision and direction of the slate-writing of the primer classes in the country districts. I quote Mr. Mulgan's words: "In very many cases too little is demanded from the children in the primer classes in the matter of figuring and writing, especially in the lower divisions. The teacher sets a copy on the blackboard, the time allowed for the reproduction of which is, say, twenty minutes. At the end of six or eight minutes several of the pupils have finished. On examining their slates, however, it is found that the work is done in such a way as to leave no room for doubt that hardly any effort has been made either to understand or to carry out what is required. The figures or letters are written anywhere on the slate, regardless of lines, slope, or the space the copy should occupy." In small infant classes, I may remark, the copy for writing and figuring is best put on the pupils' slates. They can imitate a letter written on a slate side by side with their own copies of it much more successfully than one written on a distant blackboard.