

It is often assumed that nothing has been done in the desired direction in this country. This, as I hope to show presently, is quite a mistake. I would preface my remarks on this head, however, by saying that, whereas in many other countries the control of education is largely centralised, in New Zealand we go to what some may regard as the other extreme of local control by means of Education Boards and School Committees, even the inspectors of schools being officers not of the Education Department, but of the local Boards. The function of the central Department is, therefore, not to establish schools or to introduce compulsory this or that form of instruction, but by its general regulations and the grants it offers to encourage the local controlling authorities to introduce such instruction as is most suited to the district.

This, I claim, the Government of the colony, through its Education Department, has done.

1. The new syllabus, about which you, no doubt, have heard much discussion, expressly encourages such an arrangement of the school course that the various portions of the work shall have immediate reference to the facts and needs of the children's daily life. The methods of instruction suggested, for instance, in geography imply the giving-up of the learning of mere lists of names of foreign places and the useless copying of maps from an atlas in favour of the actual observation of the physical features of the country in which the children live, and the drawing of maps and plans based as far as possible upon their own rough measurements. Similar principles underlie the proposed reforms in the teaching of other subjects. Some amount of nature-study must be taken up in every school, whether large or small; and, at the risk of repetition, I will quote what is declared in the syllabus to be the purpose of nature-study: It is "to train children in the careful observation of surrounding objects and of common phenomena, and to set them to ask themselves questions such as, 'What does this mean, and how does it act, and why?'" Such questions cannot properly be answered out of books, however well written. The children must use their eyes and reason from what they see. Only years of experience can give the ripe judgment of the skilful farmer, but those trained in their early years to habits of intelligent observation will be likely to acquire far sooner and more easily that sound judgment that so many of their fathers have bought at the cost of repeated mistakes.

2. In schools of grade 4 and higher grades—that is, schools with more than forty children in average attendance—there must be a definite course of nature-study, or elementary science, or of handwork that includes a training in elementary scientific method, such as cottage-gardening, dairy-work, agriculture, elementary physics, &c. The choice of the subject is left to the individual school and the local authority; but it is enjoined that the subject chosen should in all cases have immediate reference to the local surroundings. This, of course, implies rural subjects in rural schools. Allow me to call your attention especially to clauses 53, 54, and 56 of the standard regulations. Clause 54 suggests subjects for a course of nature-study. For instance: "The structure of a well-known mammal, as a rabbit; the differences in form and habit of various mammals. . . . Insects: The life-history of a few common insects—butterflies, moths, flies, beetles, grubs, and caterpillars, hive-bees, and wild bees, &c. (Butterflies or moths may be reared in the school.) . . . Plants: Flowers (wild and garden), roots, leaves, seeds, and fruits; the life of plants, germination, and growth; the effect of light, moisture, soil, and manures. Trees and the common kinds of timber. Wheat and other useful grasses. The weather, rainfall. Milk, cream, butter, curds, whey, cheese, tests for milk. Outdoor studies in geography, land-measuring, natural history calendars, weather calendars," &c.

Clause 56 gives an indication of the topics from which there may be selected subjects for a course of lessons in elementary science suitable for the upper classes of a country school. Most of these have an even more direct bearing upon agriculture than the topics already referred to under the head of nature-study, but the treatment suggested is similar in character. For example, various experiments and observations of plant-life are given, to be carried out by the children individually, on seedlings and plants raised in pots and in small plots in the school garden. Almost every successful scheme of rural instruction includes the keeping of school gardens, in which children, under proper guidance, can rear with various methods of treatment as to soil, manure, &c., most of the plants that are found on an ordinary farm, keeping calendars and careful notes of their work and its results, of the productiveness of the seeds under varying conditions, the cost, and so forth. Your chairman has referred in terms of praise to a school garden, laboratory, and museum that he has seen at the Mauriceville School. I am glad to say that is not a solitary instance. There are gardens in connection with many other schools, and in almost every case, from the reports I receive, I believe the benefits are very great. Under the Manual and Technical Instruction Act, "cottage-gardening" is recognised as a subject in ordinary primary schools, district high schools, or secondary schools, and a capitation of 5s. per head is paid if forty lessons of not less than one hour each are given during the year. "Dairy-work" similarly receives a grant of 10s. or 15s., according to circumstances; and elementary agriculture and kindred subjects receive grants of 2s. 6d. or 5s. per head, according to the amount of time devoted to the instruction.

Other grants in aid of the necessary apparatus and of the instalment of such classes have been given from time to time, although I am not in a position to say whether such grants will be continued in the future. Many schools have established such classes without any other Government assistance than the capitation named above, which I believe to be in all cases sufficient for the annual maintenance of the classes. It is for you, gentlemen, and others similarly placed, to use your influence with Education Boards, School Committees, and teachers to see that these subjects of rural education, for which the syllabus and the regulations under the Manual and Technical Instruction Acts make such ample provision, are introduced into all our country schools, and receive therein the attention they deserve. The Government can hardly do more without interfering with the local control, which is the characteristic feature of our education system. You, if any one, ought to be able to move the local educational authorities and local public opinion in the desired direction. And if the union did nothing else in a whole year than to emphasize this, it would be doing as good work as any body of men could do.