

SOUTHLAND.

SIR,—

Education Office, Invercargill, 13th March, 1907

We have the honour to present our annual report for the year ended the 31st December, 1906. It gives us great pleasure to record our conviction that substantial progress has been made during the year, thanks partly to the adoption of more rational methods of teaching, partly to the adoption of clearer ideals of education. We cannot, however, shut our eyes to the fact that the stimulus due to the issue of the current syllabus and the mental activity evoked (or provoked) by it, have to some extent died away, and that there is a danger of relapse into the bad old methods of bygone years. This decadence or stagnation is, we think, to be traced to three distinct causes—to the inability or unwillingness on the part of some of our teachers to comprehend the newer conceptions of education, to the increased burden which these conceptions are supposed to throw upon the teacher, and to the incompleteness, the inconsistency, the utter ineptitude of the schemes of work considered as satisfactory by many of our weakest and least experienced teachers. A consideration of these three in order may be profitable to those concerned.

In relation to the first, the following passages from an American writer seem so apt that we quote them in full: "From earliest times down to a generation ago education was a breathing-in process that simply continued and expanded the original act of creation. Then there arose a new conception concerning the making of a man, and educational theory is slowly changing its form. Responding to influences from without, life is an unfolding process from within—this is the conception that is now shaping our methods of instruction. The old found satisfaction in a state of mind that was quietly receptive; the new sees hope in the turbulence of inquiry." "When the work of the children springs from their own initiative it will become essentially creative and not imitative. Creative work transforms the individual. Through it alone he grows and maintains a personality that makes him different from the others. Through it alone his generation rises above all that have preceded. Imitation is a training in conformity. It holds the creative instinct in abeyance until, at maturity, it is the exceptional man or woman who is not hopelessly bound by the shackles of convention. If he would ever create he must override the prejudices ground into him by the schools, and even then the daring freedom of childhood but rarely comes again. The gospel of conformity teaches that the best has been done—that naught remains for us but imitation. This, too, in face of the practical fact that the discoveries of to-day have sent to the scrap-heap the brilliant inventions of yesterday." And again, "All the activities of school are reduced as nearly as possible to that monotonous routine known to the devotee of system as regular work, which offers no place for the creative intelligence in either thought or deed. The constructive idea now being realised in various forms of handwork is the thin edge of the wedge that is opening the way to reform. Anything which involves the hand immediately arouses the creative instinct. Only when the dominant note of the school is clearly creative does it lay hold on the vital and continuous interests of the children and become essentially educative. Every creative activity will have its artistic aspect, for when the soul enters a creation, then and there, art is born." We make no apology for quoting so extensively—the extracts are so pregnant with wisdom, so charged with enthusiasm, as to merit their inclusion in full.

So important, indeed, does it seem to us that every teacher in our service should have a clear idea of the aim towards which he works that we venture another presentation of the modern conception of education. Three progressive stages may be recognised in this conception, which may be named for the sake of convenience the abstract, the material, and the ethical. Education in the first stage is concerned with facts as facts, with ideas as ideas—there is no correlation between these two sets of things; the pupil is essentially an imitator, imbibing the knowledge offered him in set lessons without satisfying himself as to its basis of truth; the knowledge acquired is mainly of words ("dead vocables") not of things; memory is cultivated almost exclusively to the neglect of the other mental faculties; and the result of the whole process is to be discovered in answer to the question, "What has he learnt?"

In the second stage, the material, to which, roughly speaking, general adhesion has now been given, the study of names has given way, more or less, to the study of things, the conning of lessons to the observation of phenomena; the teacher seeks to place the child within a suitable environment, the parts of which he observes and studies with a view to satisfying himself as to their true nature and operation, singly and in combination; the intelligence of the pupil is developed by mental operations aroused by stimulation from without but conducted by himself according to the laws of his own individuality; memory, always indispensable, though still cultivated, takes its proper place; the knowledge acquired at school has a direct reference to the realities of the field, the mart, and the workshop. In short, the pupil has become less an imitator than a creator. The success of the process of education is judged more in answer to the question, "What can he do?" than "What has he learnt?"

In the third stage of the conception of education, the value of the results attained in the first two stages is recognised, but their completeness is questioned. The questions, "What has he learnt?" and "What can he do?" are not sufficiently exhaustive. Both of them may be answered satisfactorily while as yet the child is imperfect as a moral factor in the evolution of his race. Learning is at best but fallible; material achievements, transitory. All things mortal have their appointed time and season—all but the moral will by which "man affirms himself amid the shows of things that change and pass alike within and without." The question, therefore, that concerns us at the close of a child's school career is not merely "What has he learnt?" or "What can he do?" but "What has he become?" For the last of these three questions we may substitute "What *will* he do?" with little loss of sense; indeed, with some added force of illumination. All the child's learning, all his power of action, must be under the denomination of a conscious purpose—the purpose, namely, to make the most of his life for his own and the common good.

The importance of this phase of education must be obvious to all. To neglect the moral training of our children is a suicidal policy endangering our very existence as a nation. As to the type of character to be aimed at, we have little love for the silly sentimentalism of the "goody-goody" books.