

APPENDIX A.

REPORT OF THE CHIEF INSPECTOR OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

SIR,—

Wellington, 31st March, 1923.

I have the honour to present my report on primary education for the year 1922.

It is pleasing to be able to record a distinct advance towards better conditions of working in the primary schools. During the year additional assistant teachers were allotted to schools where the Inspectors reported there was urgent need for a larger staff than that normally provided. With the same object in view, and in order to increase the efficiency of the larger schools, Inspectors were enjoined to see that all head teachers undertook a fair share of actual teaching and in other respects made themselves a vital factor in establishing the efficiency of their schools. Fortunately, few headmasters fall short in this respect; nevertheless there are some whom the Inspector rarely if ever sees engaged in actual teaching. If such head teachers allow themselves to grow out of touch with modern methods they cannot but fail to be a source of inspiration to their staff. The headmasters of large schools can, if they desire, be a most potent factor in the training of young teachers, and hence a means of raising the standard of efficiency of a very large proportion of the teaching staff throughout the Dominion. The opportunities young teachers have during their training-college course to assimilate and practice good methods of teaching are of necessity very limited, and if their training were continued under progressive headmasters the benefit to the whole profession would be incalculable. I regret that cases have been reported to me of head teachers damping the enthusiasm of young teachers fresh from college by directing them to abandon the more modern methods of instruction and to revert to formal and stereotyped methods. Thus are the hands of the clock set back.

This point requires further emphasis. Common-sense demands that in the interests of general efficiency and public economy there shall be co-ordination of effort on the part of all concerned in primary education. Inspectors, headmasters, lecturers, teachers of method—all who are concerned with the training of young teachers—must, if we are to have a successful service, march with the times, and by careful reading and critical examination of the records of modern educational practice fit themselves to be what the country expects them to be, a source of inspiration to those in their charge. So stagnant has educational thought become in some quarters that one feels more inclined to welcome than to quell the revolutionary, who, with his “mad theories,” at least stimulates thought and challenges contradiction. Anything is better than smug content with the “is” or the “has been.”

The stereotyped retort of the teacher who is satisfied to make no progress in method is that he fears the new methods may fail to secure for him the same results as he secured from the old. He must, in the modern inelegant phrase, “deliver the goods.” What are, or ought to be, “the goods” is a question of vital importance. For the moment, however, we may take it that “the goods” referred to are the ordinary equipment of knowledge (much of it lumber) that the schoolboy has from time immemorial been expected to carry away with him from his school. These are easily measureable results, and, as long as they remain in high favour as providing a ready means of assessing a teacher’s efficiency, no teacher can be blamed for adhering to a teaching method that produces them in the shortest possible time. If these so-called results are all we want the traditional moss-covered methods will do: but are they all we want? If not, what better have the newer methods to offer?

The broad distinction between the methods of the past and the methods of to-day may be stated thus: the former made the child the passive recipient, and in most cases the unwilling storehouse, of as much information as the teacher could induce him, or, alas! force him, to hold; the newer methods of teaching aim at securing the co-operation of the pupil, mainly through the interest that certain subjects possess in themselves, or through the satisfaction gained in acquiring knowledge by self-effort. (In one annual report the Inspectors say: “The experience of teachers shows that as a rule anything that interferes with the fulfilment of the contract or assignment of work is an annoyance to the pupil, so eager is he to prosecute his studies unaided.”) According to the old method the maintenance of the authority and infallibility of the teacher was of paramount importance; the modern method requires the teacher to point the way and, as it were, to accompany the child in his search for truth. He and the child become co-workers, and the dignity of the rostrum is forgotten. Whether this co-operation of teacher and pupil is best attained through the modern type of oral lesson or through some system of so-called “auto-education” cannot be discussed here. I was gratified, however, to note during the year the awakening of interest among both Inspectors and teachers in the Dalton laboratory plan—a system of setting pupils to work through weekly contracts or assignments of work. Some exceedingly gratifying results of the method were shown me by several teachers; but there are obvious imperfections in the system, and it is by no means the last word in educational advancement. The underlying principles both in the Dalton plan and in the Montessori method are, however, sound; and it is to be regretted that more educators do not realize their value.