

PROBLEM OF RETARDATION.

The table on the previous page classifies, according to age and standard of education, the whole of the pupils who were in attendance at public primary schools at the 30th June, 1927.

The heavy lines indicate the normal progress of a pupil who, entering between the age of six years and seven years, spends two years in the preparatory classes and one year in each of the standard classes, and is thus receiving instruction in Standard VI when he is between thirteen and fourteen years of age.

In previous reports the table has been compiled to show the age and standard of education of the pupils in attendance at the end of the year under review. In the report for last year the table was so compiled, the result being that 35 per cent. of the total number of children in attendance was shown to be below the lines of normal progress. It was pointed out in the report that the position thus presented was not strictly correct, since at the end of the year the bulk of the children had actually passed through the classes in which they were shown in the table and were on the point of entering higher classes. With the object of remedying this obvious defect the Department decided last year to obtain the information as to age and standard of education at the 30th June—the middle of the school year—instead of as previously at the 31st December. The figures thus obtained are now tabulated on the previous page, and it will be noted that only 22 per cent. of the total number of pupils enrolled now appear below the normal lines of progress. This, it is thought, is a more correct statement of the position than has been presented in previous years.

Some years ago a thorough investigation was made into the causes of retardation in one of the education districts, with the following results: It was found that approximately 44 per cent. of the retarded pupils, or 1·6 per cent. of all the pupils on the school roll, were of subnormal mentality, a percentage that corresponds very closely with that recorded in Toronto and Vancouver, where similar investigations were made. Other causes of retardation beyond the control of teachers and education authorities are—

- (a) Pupils changing from school to school, which accounts for about 12 per cent. of the retardates ;
- (b) Pupils late in commencing school, a cause that accounts for no less than 22 per cent. of the retardation ;
- (c) Non-English pupils, 5 per cent. ;
- (d) Long distance from school, 3 per cent.

It is interesting to note that according to returns furnished by the teachers only twenty-four pupils out of 3,390, or 0·7 per cent., were retarded owing to changes of teachers. Other causes noted by the teachers were ill health, unfavourable home environment, and work out of school hours.

This is not the place to deal exhaustively with the subject of retardation, but it must be explained that the standards by which retardation is judged are largely those to which we have become accustomed by tradition and which at best are but arbitrary. Before it is possible to dogmatize regarding the extent of retardation in New Zealand schools standardized tests must be established. A great deal of experimental work has already been done in this direction, but the investigation has not yet proceeded far enough to enable the tests to be issued.

Unwise though it would be to rely too closely on deductions from the table on the previous page, certain general tendencies may, however, be discovered by a close examination of the figures. For example, the percentage of retardation appears lowest in the preparatory classes and suddenly increases when the pupils enter the standard classes ; in fact, the retardation progressively increases until Standard V is reached, after which there is a slight fall in Standard VI, due, no doubt, to the fact that by that time the older pupils have left school. The table further appears to show that among the girls there is a slightly greater degree of acceleration than among the boys.