

Special Papers.

OUR EXAMINATION SYSTEM.*

CERTAIN DEFECTS; A FEW REMEDIES SUGGESTED.

Granted that our different examinations are fairly well conducted, what then? Is there any evil that seems to accompany as an invariable concomitant or to follow as an invariable result? Have examinations too prominent a place in our education system? Or to put the question in a more practical form, "Is the pupil who attends one of our schools, and who does not desire, and who has no occasion to take any of the departmental examinations, in any way prejudicially affected by the fact that he is necessarily placed in a class-room among a host of others who are directly preparing for one or other of these examinations?" I think a close inspection of our High Schools and Collegiate Institutes will disclose the fact that the student who is not preparing directly for any particular examination is, if not neglected, at least *unduly urged to study for one or other of the examinations.*

The report of the Minister of Education for 1886 shows that of a total attendance of about 15,000 High School pupils, 5,777 were preparing for a teacher's non-professional certificate. High school Inspector Seath, commenting upon this statement in his report for 1887, goes on to say that "this must, however, be the number actually preparing for the next ensuing examination. It does not include those in the lower classes whose course had not then been clearly determined; for in July, 1887, no fewer than 5,689 wrote at the third and second-class examinations alone. I am, I believe, within the mark when I say that about half of the pupils in attendance at the High Schools have a teacher's certificate in view. This condition of matters, there is every reason to believe, is due to two main causes:

(a.) The influence exerted by the teachers to induce their pupils to take the non-professional examinations, and

(b.) The comparative ease with which the aspirant can obtain a teacher's professional certificate, especially of the lowest grade.

That indisputable reports reveal to us the fact that at least one half the pupils attending our High Schools and Collegiate Institutes are to-day preparing for a teacher's non-professional certificate, should certainly lead all concerned to earnestly and thoughtfully enquire whether, after all that is said of our much boasted school system, some radical changes are not needed to make it even approximate a model system. The same report that is authority for the statement that in 1886 there were 5,689 candidates for a teacher's non-professional certificate, contains on page twenty the following sentence: "There are now 5,454 school houses in the province." It seems then that in 1886 we had 5,454 school houses and that there were in the same year 5,689 candidates who wrote for teacher's certificates—more candidates in one year at one examination for certificates, a goodly number of which when granted would be life-long—than there were schools in the province. One thing we can certainly boast of and that is a bountiful harvest of aspirants to the teaching profession, but how bootless is the boon! Surely we are wasting our energies in producing that which perisheth, else how soon would there be a plethoric ill among the pedagogues. But, alas! alas! the grass withereth, the flower fadeth and the teacher tarrieth not with us! It needs no argument to convince one that the majority of those engaged in teaching are travelers and not sojourners. They are hastening on to what they consider a better land, and use the teaching profession, as do the wandering Italians the harp, for the purpose of making money wherewith to speed them on their journey. We say that this is an abnormal and an undesirable state of affairs. Reform is needed somewhere. Changes, and radical changes, should be made; none but radical changes will eradicate the evils of any system. And no eradication can take place without affecting the root of the evil, and to reach the root

of the evil we must *begin* where? With university education? No. Collegiate Institute training? No. High School work? No. Common School work? Certainly.

This conclusion raises the question, "What should be the subjects of study in our Common schools?" This calls for the solution of a prior and more ultimate problem, "Why should children be educated?" As to the "why" of education we might dismiss it with the statement that the child is taught in order that he or she may become the more useful citizen. But as to how this state of future usefulness is best obtained opinions differ. There are those who hold that a child's early education should be general and theoretical; at all events that the *ratio essendi* of the school room is not to train students for any particular profession or occupation. We accept the latter statement as negatively setting forth the correct ideal of the school room. But should not the student be allowed that option of studies which, while affording equally good mental gymnastics with another or others, bears most directly on his future life's work? Is not this principle admitted and do we not find it objectivised around us in our present educational institutions? Nay, verily have we not gone a step further and do we not in our state schools train directly for some of the professions? Do we not actually train teachers at the public expense? Have we not a faculty of medicine and a school of engineering in connection with our national university? Also, on paper at least, a law course. Are we not agitating for and about to establish a chair of pedagogics, and is its prospective occupant not already selected? I do not wish to be understood as saying that lawyers and doctors are educated at the public expense. The law society is a student-and-profession-sustained institution; is entirely separate from our national system of education; is not supported from the public chest; we may therefore disregard it. The teacher, however, is the peculiar pet of the state; he receives all his education, both non-professional and professional, barring the payment of a few nominal fees, at the public expense. Does this give you any cue as to why candidates for the teaching profession are so numerous?

But I am digressing. The point I wish to make is that, particularly in our more advanced state schools, the principle of optional courses of study is recognized as desirable and advantageous. The prospective physician is allowed to be graduated from our national university in a particular department, *e.g.*, chemistry or biology. Nay, he is now assisted, as I understand the affiliation scheme, a very little, it is true, but still nevertheless assisted, in his purely professional studies for the degree of M.D.

What suitable optional course has the prospective farmer or mechanic? How is the state manifesting its interest in them? The majority of our citizens are and must continue to be agriculturists. On them more than on any other class depends the future of our nation. Its rank and status among the nations of the world will vary in no small degree with the varying success of the farming community. The more scientifically we farm, the more successfully we farm. While the prescribed optional courses are numerous on our curriculums, which of them has any practical bearing on the duties of farm life? Prescriptive authority, couched in departmental regulations and edicts, says to a student, "Certain studies you must take, others you may"; but in the long lists that follow the "must" and the "may" we look in vain for a single text on any agricultural subject. It may be argued that the common school is not the place for optional studies; that specific courses should not be pursued until a later stage. If this be so we are practically argued out of court, for the *hoi polloi*, the masses, the great majority of students, do not complete even a common school course. Is there not a danger in our common schools, in our desire to avoid training the boy for any particular profession or occupation, that we have gone into the other extreme; and, to the boy whose school days' circumstances terminate all too soon, that the training we give him is too unpractical and that it does not sufficiently bear upon his after-life struggle for bread and butter? Let us exemplify. You teach the prospective farmer that the Ural, Volga, Don, Dnieper and Dneister flow in certain directions—rivers he never saw and never will see—and yet

he leaves the common school, and so far as your teaching is concerned, he knows not whether heavy clay, mixed loam, or pure blow sand is or is not well adapted for wheat growing. Again the boy can string off the different counties in England in beautiful rotation, yet, so far as his school education goes, he knows not the difference between a Durham and a Devon, a Cotswold and a Southdown, a Percheron and a Clyde, an Essex and a Berke.

Now what is the result? If mere ignorance of everything agricultural were the only result, the evil would be comparatively light and would soon be remedied. But suppose we place in your common school a boy who has a natural liking for farm work and farm life, but who desires a fitting education, both general and special. In his desire for knowledge he climbs higher and higher, until he has reached the end of the ascending common school road. Here the state authorities intervene, examine him carefully, and peradventure he is given a ticket that allows him to enter a High School car. He steps aboard and is carried onward and upward until he reaches the next station, which is duly announced as the "third-class" city, the inhabitants of which are pedagogues in a primeval state of existence. Possibly the conductor is scrupulously conscientious; if so, he merely announces the name of the city; if not, he urges the traveller to at least pass through the city, remarking that he may take in the sights for the small sum of \$5; that he can board the car at the other side and that he will thus bring glory and honor to both himself and the conductor. Here is the first trap-door; that escaped, he is carried onward until the "second-class city" is announced. Here citizenship is not so easily acquired, for the aspirant must have certain other passports than that of the ordinary traveller; still the additional requirements are few and may have been easily acquired *en route*. Again the traveller sees a goodly number leave the car never again to return. This station passed, he soon reaches the Grand Junction, where are numerous diverging lines leading to quite different termini, towards each or any of which a Government car is ready to conduct him. One manned by a dozen or so burly conductors will carry the traveller, he having first paid some pretty heavy fees, to the terminus marked M.D.; another with a paste-board car and no conductor points to the city of the LL.B.'s; another with a fair staff of officials is ready to carry him to the city of the C.E.'s. Along another somewhat broad avenue he sees Government officials busy surveying, planning and mapping out a route, and plainly visible is the portly figure of the prospective conductor who is yet to guide the traveller to the city of the professional pedagogues. In vain does he strain his eyes for the conductor with the sunburnt countenance and the brawny arm, who is to conduct him to the fertile plains where the professional farmer is wont to dwell. Somewhat disappointed, he again enters the car, determined still to take another chance; the car moves on until it makes its final halt, and the traveller finds himself in the fast growing city of the B.A.'s.

But you ask me, "Why all this figurative romancing?" I answer that I have endeavored faithfully to picture the boy's course from the day he enters the common school until he is graduated from our national university, and it is almost a certainty that he will not now return to farming. But you say, "Might he not have taken a course at the Agricultural College and have taken a B.S.A. (Bachelor of the Science of Agriculture) instead of having taken an Arts course and a B.A.?" True. But notice how the prescribed course of studies in the common and the High Schools naturally led him to adopt the latter course and to shun the former. There is not one book on the whole common school curriculum that serves to remind him of the farm and the nobility of farm life; not even an optional study to keep up old farm associations. When he enters the High School, in addition to the fact that he must leave home and the old home associations, he finds a special course mapped out for the teacher; another, the commercial course, for the future business man. Law, medical and arts students are prepared for their matriculation examinations; but students preparing for matriculation or entrance to the Agricultural College, he findeth not. Like the Ancient Mariner, he is "Alone, alone, all, all alone. . . ."

*Paper read by A. G. McKay, M. A., at the West Grey Teachers' Association, Owen Sound, Oct. 5, 1888.

(To be concluded in next issue.)