

Special Papers.

THE ACTION OF EXAMINATIONS.*

BY JOHN MILLAR, B.A., ST. THOMAS.

If we should step into the convocation hall of our provincial university, in the month of May, some four hundred young men and women would be found committing to paper the substance of what a year's study has enabled them to gather from textbook or college professor. A similar sight, though not on so large a scale, may be noticed, about the same time, in the other higher seats of learning of our country. Two months afterwards, when the beams of a July sun bring perspiration to the brow of earnest workers, four thousand high school students are grappling with the difficulties of Departmental examinations, and seeking to pass as third, or second-class teachers, or to rank as matriculants in one of our universities. In the beginning of the same month, and again in December, ten thousand boys and girls, the very hope of our country, gather from rural school section, and from village, town, and city public school, to exhibit, for the consideration—perhaps for the amusement—of examining boards, the half-developed thoughts which zealous teachers have pressed into their little heads. Again comes the round of promotion examinations, which affect nearly all of the half million pupils attending our public schools. We have, besides, the weekly, monthly, or quarterly written examinations, conducted by every experienced teacher, and the various professional examinations by which the avenues are opened for reinforcing the great body of teachers, ministers, lawyers, doctors, or civil servants. In short, the work of examinations has become one of immense proportions, and its influence upon the character of our educational system, of correspondingly great importance. This may appropriately be termed the age of examinations. Unlike the stone age, which presents the fossils of a barbarous era, or the age of iron, which reveals the progress of an infant civilization, the age of examinations enable us to see, consider, scrutinize, and weigh the results which pass before our own eyes.

In the various discussions which engage the attention of teacher's conventions, there is no subject more interesting to the student, more pertinent to the teacher's work, or more perplexing to Departmental school officials, than the regulations respecting examiners and examinations. The golden age, of which philosophers at one time often wrote, and of which poets have often sung, had some tendency to charm, but the age of examinations has not yet exhibited any indications that will calm the agitated mind of anxious student, toiling teacher, or oft-abused examiner.

In that very readable work of Latham's, "On the Action of Examinations," we have clearly stated many of the advantages as well as the principal disadvantages of systems of examination. Latham decries, however, more especially with their action in connection with the English university system. It will be more profitable for the members of this Association to notice and discuss the main features of examinations, in so far as those held in the high and public schools have an influence upon the education of the Province.

It should be noticed, at the outset, that the aim of examinations is two-fold:—(1) To select from a number of candidates those who possess certain attainments, and (2) to give assistance to the teacher, in the way of giving further incentives to students, and enabling him to realize how far his instruction has been effectual. The difficulties which have arisen in connection with our system of examinations, are largely the result of this necessary double object. If our examinations were solely for one of these purposes many of their objectionable features could be removed. For instance, if the only purpose to be served was that of testing knowledge and ability, the course would be much easier than at present. Again, if the purpose of the examiner were to give direction to the teaching, regardless of the object to select candidates, there would be far less trouble in framing suitable questions.

So far as can be learned from the history of ex-

aminations, the educational purpose was the object for which they were instituted. Professors in the European universities found that their lecturing or teaching would be much more effective if written tests were employed from time to time, to determine how far their instruction was understood. No teaching is worth much where a large part of the hour in the recitation is not taken up in receiving oral answers from the pupils. There are secured in this way method in thought and care in expression. Language is cultivated, and back of it that order in the arrangement of ideas which may be judged from the manner in which thought is itself expressed.

As many a teacher has discovered, some pupils who answer very well in the ordinary recitation, do very poorly in a written examination. Hence the obvious advantage of requiring students to commit their thoughts to writing, and the further advantage of making the effort a test of what they have gained by the work of the teacher. An examination, to have a proper educational value, must be in the line of the teaching, and must be conducted by the teacher and no other. This assumes, of course, that the teacher is competent. There is, perhaps, no better means of judging the ability of a teacher, as an instructor, than to notice the character of the questions he puts to his pupils during a recitation. If he knows how to "educate," in the true sense of the term, his questions will mark every time the true educator. In like manner, the questions he gives at his weekly or monthly examinations will show the nature of the results he has been aiming to secure.

Written examinations are, however, imperfect tests of knowledge, and they are, besides, still more imperfect tests of ability. How often do we find the pupil of superior knowledge outstripped at a written examination by one that is not so well acquainted with the subject! More frequently still do we find a pupil of inferior ability surpass one of superior ability. The reason for this is obvious. A written examination does not, as a rule, enable a teacher to know what is "in" a pupil so well as the answers given in the class. To judge a pupil we must know how he does his work from day to day, and it is quite evident the teacher alone is in a position to form a judgment of this kind.

If this view be correct, the teacher is the only person fully competent to make promotions in his school. Latham says, "It is one of the drawbacks to the use of examinations in general that they tend to crush spontaneity, both in the pupil and the teacher; and this tendency is far greater when the examination is supreme and external to the teaching, than when the teaching and examining bodies are one. . . . When the examination is supreme the teacher is hampered, and feels that he is no longer an educator." For over thirty years the public schools in the city of Cincinnati had the promotions made on the results of written examinations. In referring to the plan the superintendent says, "The influence on the teaching in the schools has been evil and that continually." In Boston the plan of basing the promotions solely on the results of examinations at the close of the term has been abandoned. One of its principles writes, "Tests should be given in a systematic manner, by the regular teacher, under the direction of the master, along the prescribed lines of work; and when the time for promotion comes, the record of the work, with the opinion of the teacher in charge, and the master, should settle the case." Another Boston master in giving his disapproval of the method of depending entirely on examinations says, "Instead of these a test is given every Friday afternoon in the school year, varying from twenty minutes to an hour and a half.

The results are kept in permanent form, in appropriate books. They furnish a reliable record of individual work and hence a proper basis for promotion." In St. Louis, Baltimore, Chicago and other American cities, the promotions are largely based upon the opinions of the teachers. In some counties of Ontario it has been customary to have committees appointed to examine the papers sent in by pupils, and the Inspector and the committee determine the promotions. I should strongly object to any persons other than the teachers conducting the promotion examination. To have uniform questions has its advantages, but the head teacher, aided by the assistants, should decide who are to be advanced to higher classes.

There are some institutions that boast of being free from all examinations. A1 that may be said is "pity the students" and "save us from such schools." Latham says:—"Because of the widespread human frailty of laziness some motive must be supplied to spur students to the salutary exercise of their minds. We should be glad to find such motives as sense of duty, confidence in teachers, and kindly encouragement sufficient for the occasion. Happily they are so in many instances, but they often require to be supplemented by some kind of coercion. The form in which this is most conveniently administered is that of a course of examinations so arranged as to supply constant and appropriate mental exercise. "I should favor the plan of having this "mental exercise" every week or two on Friday afternoon, and though it would be well to have some examinations at the close of the term, yet the character a student has earned should be the main factor in deciding about his promotion. To me the question is not "what percentage has he made?" but "is he fit to be put in a higher class?" and if the teacher and principal cannot answer this question, who can?"

When we come to the high school entrance examination, as the candidates come from different schools, an examining board must determine the promotions. These examinations have revolutionized the teaching in our public schools. Pupils have something to aim for, and the style of the questions has given direction to the teacher's work. Even here it is unfortunate that the judgment of the teacher cannot be taken into consideration. It is a pity the standard was lowered so much last summer. The wonder was how pupils could fail in some of the subjects. It would be better to have the standard as high as it was in July, 1886. The regulation respecting recommending candidates gives every opportunity for boards to enable all deserving pupils to be admitted even should a failure occur in some subject. In my opinion no pupil should be recommended unless (1) he secures the requisite aggregate number of marks, (2) unless it would be a loss to him to remain six months' longer in the public school and (3) unless he has age and ability to warrant high school work being taken up with advantage.

The Departmental Examinations for teachers have now become the most important consideration in determining high school work. They have in a general way done an immense amount of good, but they have still associated with them many defects. We are told that of the 4,000 who wrote at these examinations last July, only some forty per cent. passed. I am ready to contend that this fact alone is sufficient to condemn some features of the system. What would be thought of a university if sixty per cent. of its students were plucked at the examinations of the different years? If the fifty per cent. were the most deficient of the candidates, does it not imply that more than half who went up were taken over ground which they were unable to traverse? It is no wonder that one of the examiners in *The Week* talks of crude answers, wretchedly constructed sentences and ungrammatical expressions in general, of the most ridiculous nature. It is most likely that the masters who taught the sixty per cent. who failed, felt during most of the time that two years should be taken instead of one. It is just here the freedom of the master in high school classification is, to some extent, interfered with. Students wish to go over the course in a certain time, and the competition among schools stands in the way. If we imagine how it would be in the public schools of a large city where pupils might attend any school to prepare for the entrance examination, we can understand the difficulty now presented in high schools. The trustees, at their Provincial Association in Toronto a few days ago, recommended a change in the law regarding high school districts. If this were carried out, it would render every high school dependent upon its own district, just as every rural school is now dependent on its own section. This would largely do away with the competition which the writer in *The Week* regards, very properly, as at the bottom of the trouble.

The present law is objectionable because it gives the master no say as to whether or not a student should write at the examination. Formerly the regulation existed requiring a candidate to give a certificate from his teacher to the effect

* Read before the Elgin Teachers' Association.