

School Reform

(The Editorial page this issue is given to a timely article from one of our occasional contributors—Dr. W. A. McIntyre, President of the Manitoba Teachers' Association. He deals with a topic of live interest.)

In all the provinces of Canada, the week after Easter is regarded as educational week. It is then that the teachers meet in their annual conventions to discuss the work of the preceding year, and to lay plans for the future. In the three prairie provinces the conventions of this year were of absorbing interest. The problems discussed were of great practical importance, and some of the decisions arrived at, indicate that in the near future there will be great changes in ideals and methods, particularly with regard to education in rural schools.

It is not to be imagined that there have been no changes in recent years. There have been as great changes here as in any other field of human activity. Those who talk theoretically or who judge the schools of to-day by those of twenty-five years ago, or who have personal reasons for remaining blind, are probably unaware of change. Yet in a single province we see illustrations of consolidation of schools, municipal school boards, organized trustees' associations, organized playground activity, school gardening, agricultural and technical courses in high schools, individual teaching, and a hundred other things that were unknown twenty-five years ago. Changes are found both in rural and urban schools. It is necessary to say that in all fairness to trustees and others who have been working while those around have been sleeping. It is natural for a man who awakes after a nap of a quarter of a century to think he is the only man who is awake.

It was not by accident, but rather in response to a continent-wide agitation or feeling, that at the recent conventions the rural school problem became the centre of interest. The clamor for reform is in part quite genuine, even though the case is at times prejudiced by the action of politicians and self-seeking agitators.

The case for the rural schools was stated by one of the speakers in these words:

"There are living in the vicinity of a fine city school several hundred pupils. In their well-ordered homes they enjoy every convenience. They are well dressed, well fed, and they give evidence that luxury is common in their homes. Tuition in music, dancing and kindred arts is given out of school. Opportunities are furnished for visiting theatres and moving picture shows. Access to good libraries is easy. Opportunities for social enjoyment are many. Athletic organizations and church privileges are free to all. This, and much more.

"There is, out in Range X and Township Y, a school building, small, cheap and dirty. It has no blinds, no paint, and since its erection it has received no care. It is never scrubbed and rarely swept. The children are poor, and many of them are unable to speak English freely. They walk from one to four miles to reach school. The average attendance is eight. The occupation of the people is mixed farming. The homes are poor, the cooking bad, the housekeeping worse. There is no reading matter in the district, and there are no social privileges. All the rest is in keeping.

"Can any one doubt that here is need of adaptation? Can any one think that the same activities and the same methods will apply to the two schools? On pedagogical grounds it is impossible to begin or to continue in the same way with the two sets of pupils. They have not the same capital to begin with. Nor on practical grounds should they follow the same course of instruction and training. The life activities in which they are to engage are, on the whole, different, and there should surely be

some relation between school activity and the activities of after-life."

As a matter of fact that is recognized everywhere to-day in actual practice. There is scarcely a teacher who does not deliberately modify the programme to suit local needs. A teacher who cannot do this should step down and out. Recently it was found that out of a group of sixty-nine untrained teachers, no less than sixty-eight had gone beyond the specific demands of the programme of studies in order to meet local needs. This makes clear the fact that success in administration of schools depends upon the character and ability of the teaching force rather than upon the content of the programme of studies. If this were recognized generally, much time would be saved in discussion, and some of the ugly and untrue things that are being said would remain unspoken. It is quite true that the programme counts for something. So do building and equipment and grounds and co-operation of parents. So do many other factors. Above all, however, stands the teacher, for in the last analyses she makes the school. It is her qualification, her spirit, her resourcefulness that chiefly count.

The word *her* is used by design. Rightly or wrongly we are tied up to lady teachers. In all attempts at reconstruction this fact must be recognized. However, it may be in ten or twenty years, it is necessary for the present that the rural schools should be taught in nine cases out of ten by ladies. In some schools this is unfortunate, in other cases it is fortunate indeed.

Now, in attempting to reform schools so as to make them more efficient and more in line with local requirements, it is possible to proceed in either of two ways. An attempt may be made to change the whole system at a sweep, or there can be a gradual modification based on experimentation and demonstration. The former course is always chosen by the man who would advertise himself and by the politician, the latter is chosen by the man of wisdom. It is worth while illustrating these two plans of procedure.

A few years ago German schools were placed before us as a model. Recent developments showed very clearly that we were wise in refusing to accept the German model. Now, we are asked to bow down and worship the Danish model. Nothing could be more unwise. Canada and Denmark differ essentially as to conditions and population. We cannot and would not breed people in these western plains after the Danish type. We must work out our own salvation. Years ago we borrowed from Ontario, and our rural schools, high schools, agricultural colleges and universities have suffered from it. We cannot afford to copy again. When one copies from another he usually copies the worst features. But it may be urged that a system can be altered in a thorough-going way without copying anybody. The answer is, that changes can be made only in so far as teachers can be found who are able to carry them out.

As a sample of working by demonstration in a selected school, it is possible to consider the problem of consolidation of schools. Consolidation may be a good or a bad thing. It does not matter as far as argument goes. The fact is, that an attempt was made in Manitoba for about ten years before any response was made. Then came Holland, then one or two other schools. Now, there are over fifty consolidated districts. Similarly take the playground movement. After long wrangling an experiment was made in one school ground in Winnipeg. Now, organized playgrounds are found everywhere in the province. It was so with school-gardening, hot lunch, sewing, domes-

tic science and the like. There is all the difference in the world between evolution and revolution.

In the attempt to get at results by wholesale methods, one speaker urged that nothing be taught in rural schools which has not practical value. What has practical value? If a child of eight is planting a garden at school, shall we call that practical, while we call singing impractical? That would be nonsense. Considering life as a whole—in the home, the church, society, in private or public—probably there is nothing that is so thoroughly practical as song. But directly it does not minister to profit. There is the damnable side to this whole practical business. As an advocate, perhaps too ardent, of the practical in education, I have to pray at times to be delivered from advocates of the practicable. It is wrong, eternally wrong, to sacrifice a little child to the vocation, as if the vocation were all in life. The school must make leaders in life, and not merely leaders in field production. It is for this reason that a cultured young lady is often the best teacher for a little child—even if the child be country-bred and the teacher city-bred. True culture doesn't seem to know the words rural and urban. When farm children get older they may require teachers with technical qualifications, but there must be a great change before we can get teachers so qualified. As it is now, the agricultural colleges cannot give us teachers enough to teach agriculture in the high schools. We must be satisfied for a time with much less than trained agricultural leaders in the one-roomed rural schools. It would, on the whole, seem wiser to begin our reforms by the method of practical demonstration. That is advisable and it is possible.

It is impossible to deal in generalities when discussing systems of education for the western provinces. What is needed is not uniformity but diversity. The school in a non-English community cannot be patterned after a school in an English community. Where children are under twelve, an attempt to teach scientific agriculture would be absurd; where they are old enough to understand and profit by instruction, such teaching is necessary. But at any age, pupils should, as one speaker suggested, get acquainted with the instruments of intelligence, and should at the same time acquire good habits, refined tastes and right dispositions. Efficiency, even on the farm, depends quite as much upon general intelligence and moral character as upon technical knowledge and skill. It is possible for an education to be so narrowly practical as to defeat its own intention.

Now, as I am not a city lawyer nor a member of the Manufacturers' Union, I am not properly qualified to advise farmers as to the education of their sons, but being country-born and country-bred, I sometimes dare to think what I should like my school education in the country to be like had I the privilege of living my life over again. I think I can say it in a sentence. I should like that there should come to me a leader or teacher—call him or her what you will—who could lift me out of my littleness, my narrowness of vision, my wrong conceptions, my crudeness in thought and manner, and make me able to appreciate the true, the beautiful and good, make me able to understand the beauty and opportunity in my own environment, and above all anxious to live and serve with the great and good of all time as my models and inspiration. I should not care to hear about crops and stock and poultry all day long. Virtue is more to be desired than prize stock and a happy home than a good bank balance.