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TORONTO, FEBRUARY, 1879.

IMPORTANCE OF THE PRIMARY TEACHER'S WORK.

While it is generally admitted that the higher classes in our public schools ought to be entrusted only to well-educated and experienced teachers, the impression seems to prevail that the primary classes may be safely placed in the hands of the veriest tyros in both knowledge and experience. "Good teachers for the higher grades, but mere apprentices for the lower grades,"—this is the policy which is not unfrequently maintained in theory, and, unfortunately for the interests of education, too often reduced to practice. It is perfectly absurd, say some from whom better things might have been expected, to exact a knowledge of literature, history, music, drawing, &c., from those who are to teach junior grades, and whose highest work will therefore be to impart a knowledge of the bare rudiments of the "three R's." When men who are popularly credited with holding enlightened views of the nature and aim of education take such ground as this, we cannot wonder that school trustees, too often governed by a spirit of false economy, show a constant preference for the *cheap* teacher, and practically illustrate their abiding conviction that "*anything* will do for primary classes." If any one thinks we are stating the case too strongly, let him compare the salaries of teachers in the lower grades of our schools with those of teachers in the higher grades, and granting that the "labourer is worthy of his hire," and that the "hire" is a measure of the labourer's worth, he will be forced to the conclusion that the great work of primary education is at present largely in the hands of comparatively illiterate and inexperienced teachers.

Now, this utterly inadequate view of the nature and results of primary education—this wretched theory that the possession of the mere rudiments of learning qualifies a man as an EDUCATOR—has operated, and is still operating, adversely to the highest interests of national education. The country demands, and wisely, from teachers in our higher forms, considerable education and culture—a measure of enthusiasm in their work, some insight into human nature, and a knowledge of the laws of mental development. But we maintain that, in the entire field of educational effort, the work of the primary teacher is second to none; we may go further and declare that it is above

and beyond all others in importance—demanding a not less cultivated intellect, a more loving and patient heart, a sublimer self-devotion, and a clearer insight into human nature, and especially child nature. Under the primary teacher the child makes a beginning which will tell with good or evil influence on all his after life. Shall a love of learning or a distaste for all study be engendered? Shall rational methods of instruction prevail, and thus secure a wise economy of time and the happy results of earnest and well-directed effort? Shall proper habits be formed, and, by a wise discipline of intellect and moral nature, the foundation of a noble character be laid? The answer to these and kindred questions, with all that they involve, depends on the character of the work done in the primary school-room.

Taking even the lowest view of education, it is an error to infer that because only the elements of learning are to be taught, the illiterate teacher is quite competent for the task. It is not true, for example, that "anybody" can teach the multiplication table, or give the child its first idea of numbers. The mere empiric may indeed attempt to teach this source of juvenile "vexation." But how does he proceed, and with what result? He "grinds" in a vain repetition of (to the child) unmeaning words; he makes no appeal to the intelligence; he is a mere instrument for mechanical cramming; and his efforts are attended with the usual result of inciting disgust in the minds of the poor unfortunates who are compelled to submit to the unnatural operation. However elementary the subjects of instruction may be, they are infinitely better taught by him whose thorough education enables him to fully comprehend their relation to the knowledge of which they form the groundwork, and places at his command a wealth of illustration far beyond the power of him whose attainments consist of an imperfect knowledge of even the elements he undertakes to teach. But it is not true that the highest work of the primary teacher is to impart an elementary knowledge of the "three R's;" the highest aim of the primary teacher, and of all teachers, is the *education* of the child—the harmonious development of its nature. And in every stage of his educational course, the *mode* of instruction is of higher importance than the subjects taught. We say in *every* stage this is true, but it is pre-eminently true in connection with the primary stage. The amount of information, the facts and principles to be communicated are comparatively few, and therefore the methods of education should be as nearly perfect as they can be made by culture, training, and experience. Only in the hands of the educated teacher can these elements have any educative value. In the hands of the illiterate, the teaching may become, and too often does become, positively injurious. It degenerates into the impartation of barren facts and principles lifelessly communicated to an unawakened mind. There is placed in the teacher's charge a mind to be educated, and he is supposed to be possessed of the means by which this can be accomplished. But is it possible for him to discharge the responsibility unless he knows something of the nature of the being over whom he acts, and the effects on that nature of the various means through which he acts? How is it possible for any but injurious results to follow from the crude experi-