

SELECTIONS.

EDUCATIONAL BACKBONE.

There is no grander thing in all the universe than a strong, decided, self-reliant, independent character. Strength of will, decision of purpose, independence of action and thought,—these form the lever that moves the world. Without these, all other traits are of little worth to their possessor or to the world about him. The weak man, no matter how good his purpose, is a cipher. He can not carry out his plans, nor can he inspire others with his feelings. He can neither resist temptation nor lead others away from it. The decided, strong man, and he only, can so act and impress himself upon his time as to effect any important thing for the race. We have plenty of weak, good men. We need more of those who dare stand up for their opinions, who in fact *have* opinions, and who can be swerved neither by threats nor cajolery from their true course—men, in other words, of backbone.

Backbone does not mean, as I understand it, unbending rigidity, or obstinacy, or pugnacity. Consider the structure of the literal backbone. It is strong, but it is also elastic; it may be rigid or it may be flexible; it has a wonderful power of adaptation to varying circumstances. Nothing can better symbolize the character of the men that are the need of the time. We want such men to come forth as the product of our public schools. To this end we need backbone in all things connected with education. They should be vigorous, decided, with a definite purpose, calculated to beget in pupils a habit of independent thought adapted to their age, condition, and development, and so elastic as to serve the varying needs of the place and the time. We want backbone in our methods of teaching, in our discipline, in our courses of study, and in our whole educational system. These four points will be especially referred to in this paper.

First, as to the methods of teaching. These are sometimes too rigid, cast in an

iron mould, the same for all, young or old, mature or immature. Some teachers present every subject, even in a primary school, in a hard, dry, logical way, that has in it no variability, neither shadow of turning. The recitation is simply an examination. No helping hand is offered, and if the pupil gets into deep water, he must help himself out. At a certain age and development of his pupils, more or less of this work is needful to cultivate self-reliance; but this is quite an advanced stage. The young and immature become discouraged and faint under it. The child, in its first feeble, tottering steps, must have an arm on which he can rely for aid.

But this method is becoming old-fashioned, and others, more modern, are more popular. There is the co-operative style, as it has been called, at the other extreme, in which the pupil is not trained to depend upon himself at all. He is called, arises, hesitates, and the teacher immediately goes through the work, the pupil looks on admiringly, nods approval, and is marked 10. Or else, when he hesitates, a dozen hands go up in class, and one gives a few words, another a few more, and so on; and if he approves he is marked 10, as before. It is really astonishing to look at the class reports of such teachers, and to see how many of their pupils have stood 10 throughout the year; and it is quite as astonishing to see how many of them fail in their examinations. The failure is explained as being the result of bashfulness or nervousness when examined; but it really is because there has been no backbone in their instruction. They have been nursed and propped up with pillows until their strength is gone; and so, when left to themselves, they show how flabby and nerveless and characterless their teaching has been.

Then there are teachers who have adopted what they dignify by the name of *topical* method. What they mean by the topical method is too frequently the mere repeating