

## Special Articles.

## THE SPELLING-BOOK.

To spell, or not to spell? that is the question the Boston supervisors, in a report made to the school board of that city, have answered in the negative. Their argument, briefly put, is this: The "end sought for in any teaching of spelling" is to give the pupil ability to "spell the words of his own vocabulary;" and, again, "to train children to spell correctly common words." "But correctly written word-forms are most easily and surely acquired when the words are used in their natural connections as expressing thought." Therefore is a spelling-book not needed,—indeed, is a positive evil.

We should have little fault to find with this argument provided we could accept the premises. If it be true that the end sought for in spelling is simply ability to spell the ordinary vocabulary of the child correctly, then the best way to teach spelling would be by written composition; in fact, that would be the only sensible way. But it seems to us that this view of the matter is narrow. A spelling-book properly edited, should have a three-fold purpose. Its first object would be, as stated in the argument above, to give to the child the ability "to spell the words of his own vocabulary." But further than that (2), it would afford the simplest and most efficient means of increasing his vocabulary; and (3), it would place in the teacher's hand the best instrument for the training of the child in the use of his native tongue. It is a grievous mistake to make the vocabularies of the mass of children to depend upon the words they may pick up in the street or home. Children bred in cultivated homes, or young readers of many books, are not helped much by a spelling-book. But it must be remembered that the many are not thus bred, neither are they at an early age great devourers of books. These untoward circumstances exist, and the schools are established to supplement these deficiencies. How shall it be done? The Boston supervisors say, by copying passages from the reading lessons, writing sentences from dictation, compositions suggested by daily lessons in geography, history, physiology, etc. This is all very well, as far as it goes. But it places the child's vocabulary at the mercy of a guess, a "hit-or-miss." He may at the end of his school-course have not frequently enough all the words that he ought to know, and be able to use them, and he may not; there is no system, and therefore, no surety. A properly arranged spelling-book would bring to the eye and memory a full vocabulary; and it would bring an orderly arrangement, which is also essential.

Besides, this copying of sentences, pieces of poetry and the like, does not necessarily give to the child a better knowledge of the use of words. It may be a performance quite as perfunctory as the spelling of columns of words. Two things are essential to fix the use of a word in the memory of the child. First, he must have his attention directed to it, and, second, he must use it a great number of times in sentences which he himself has originated. It is, therefore, practically better to have the selected words by themselves in a book than scattered here and there, no one knows where, for the teachers, peradventure, to light upon.

The use or non-use of the spelling-book is also influenced by another fact; namely, that if the child has not learned to spell at the age of twelve or thirteen, the chances are that he will never learn to spell after that. Now, if his knowledge of words is to be limited to the street and the few text-books he may use, and there is to be no systematic effort to increase his vocabulary, he will often have cause for shame when he puts away his childish speech and plays the man.

We must confess that we do not think that the ability to spell correctly is of the highest order. Many valuable and pregnant thoughts have been written in what would be called to-day very poor Queen's English. Spelling is a fashion rather than a science. The spelling-book, therefore, seems to us to be of very little value unless it serves the three-fold purpose which we have already mentioned: and of these three functions, the training in the use of the word is the most important.—*N. E. Jour. of Education.*

## ✓ READING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.\*

Dull people take little thought about what they read. In their eyes one book is as good as another. It is not so with bright, quick-witted persons, determined to acquire a measure of self-culture. Their reading moulds their characters, gives method to their thoughts, and begets in them the purpose to overcome all difficulties. The last few years have been prolific of biographies and personal recollections of famous men and women. If we learn anything from the recorded lines of Macaulay, Carlyle, Bushnell, John Stuart Mill, Mary Somerville, and others, it is that in early life they were inspired by reading some one book, and educated by its silent force to a greater degree of mental activity. These books may have been as different in character as were the lives of those who studied them. It seems oftentimes to have been of little consequence what the book may have been. It was enough that it inspired in them a will to do better things. Goethe acknowledged his indebtedness to Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield" just at a critical moment of his mental development, and attributed to this charming little classic much of his subsequent education. "Percy's Reliques" fired the juvenile mind of Sir Walter Scott, and stimulated him to enter upon a literary career. Any good book, whether it be one of the world's great classics, the faithful record of some useful life, or even an obscure work of fiction, may quicken our intellect, influence our hearts, inspire us with hope, and give new strength, courage, and faith. If the book however humble, deals with the chief interests of our daily life, we may get good from it.

Recognizing the importance of a proper choice of books, many wise men have devised schemes to direct the inexperienced reader. As a rule, such well meant but ill-advised courses of reading are dreary failures. It is as difficult to dictate a formal course of mental food for another, as it would be to prescribe a daily programme of physical food. That one man's meat is often another man's poison is as true of reading as it is of eating.

We have not time to read everything, and would not if we could. Need we be ashamed that we have never read a line of Spenser, if we gain daily inspiration from Longfellow? Hume and Gibbon may be closed books to one who takes unceasing delight in Abbott and Headley. Bacon and Montaigne's may be only names to us, but Irving and Charles Lamb are our daily companions.

While we may have a hearty dislike for courses of reading which dictate particular books, we need not discharge as worthless the general suggestions of wise and good men. For instance, Emerson's three rules,—never to read a book that is not a year old; never to read any but famed books; never to read but what you like, are sensible and practical. James Freeman Clarke's rules are equally suggestive,—to read what interests you; to read actively, not passively; to read with order and method.

The advice of such men is merely suggestive and valuable as far as it goes. It is in the nature of things that it does not go far enough. We need something more. Personal help is the best, if we can get it; some good friend to awaken an interest which will

\*A. F. Blaisdell, M.D., in the *Virginia Educational Journal*.