

# The Educational Weekly.

TORONTO, MARCH 5, 1885.

IN the columns devoted to the Public School will be found an article on composition, by the editor of the *Indianapolis Educational Weekly*; and amongst our Notes and Comments are some remarks recently made on this subject by Mr. Tilley.

We think it would be difficult to lay too much stress upon the importance of teaching composition—more especially in this country. We have but to consider the loose modes of expression prevailing in ordinary conversation, the slipshod composition of the majority of letters, the inelegant phraseology of the bulk of our newspaper writers, to persuade ourselves that in Canada, and, indeed, in America, there is a great and indisputable lack of that regard for lucidity and ease of expression which are rightly considered to be the outcome of true culture. Indeed we may go further, and say that, even amongst many supposedly educated people, there is a widely prevalent ignorance of grammatical rules, resulting in an absolute impossibility of correct composition involving any comparatively complex constructions.

This being so, it is very necessary that attention should be paid to remedies for this so deplorable a want.

It is not a question of utility in the material sense. To belittle the value of acquiring grace in expressing our thoughts argues an inability to recognize the influence which such accomplishment undoubtedly possesses. It is hardly necessary here to enforce the truth of this assertion.

IN Mr. Olcott's and Mr. Tilley's remarks, many highly valuable suggestions are thrown out which, without doubt, our readers will find of benefit.

Mr. Tilley has mentioned the use of employing letter-writing as a help in teaching composition. We think the suggestion a good one. Composition, as such, is distinct from orthography, as such. To intelligibly articulate sentences is very different from correctly articulating words. The former is composition proper; the latter lies within the sphere of grammar. This distinction is not always sufficiently insisted upon. Indeed, so slightly is it recognized, that the pupil's attention is very often called away and expended upon inaccuracies of grammar, when it ought properly to be directed to inaccuracies of composition. We think that letter-writing would do much to obviate this. And in this way:—

The great difficulty children experience in

writing a composition upon a given theme is in finding "something to say." Now we consider that the first rule of composition should be—if you have nothing to say, do not say it—to use a hackneyed phrase. The efforts made to find this "something to say" are so great, that they usually exhaust all the power at disposal, and when the child begins to carefully consider how to say it, the energy is lost.

LETTER-WRITING will, we think, to a great extent eliminate this difficulty. The word "composition" carries about it an air of dignity that is often—especially to the nervous and timid, and to those who lack confidence in themselves—prejudicial to the free flow of thought—to the finding of something to say. It not seldom produces a mild form of fear, which is a great waster of energy. It is apt to paralyze the powers, to put a drag upon the mind. A letter contains none of these obstacles. It is supposed to be the expression of thoughts which the child has already had; it deals with subjects with which he is familiar; it is a style of composition to which he is no stranger; and, as a consequence of this, contains within itself a sort of standard of merit by which the writer may compare his various efforts.

The drawbacks to teaching composition by means of letter-writing may be that this will induce a colloquial or familiar style. But it would be by no means difficult to counteract this. It would be easy to impress upon the learner that no flippancy would be tolerated. A typical letter might be placed before him—English literature is rich in specimens of beautiful letters; and he could soon be taught to learn that he was expected to tell the master on paper, in the best possible style he could command, about such events as were of sufficient dignity to be worth relating.

WE think our assertion that to make children write on subjects familiar to them rather than on unknown themes, can be supported by strong and varied proofs. For, apart from the superficial points upon which we have touched above, is there not a deep and hidden significance in this caution? It could scarcely be said that it is going beyond the limits of the present question to say that we should use, with respect to teaching children composition, the same advice that Horace gives to poets:

Si vis me flere, dolendum est  
Primum ipsi tibi:

"If you wish to make me weep, you yourself must have first suffered."

All great writers—writers famed for their composition, agree in this. Thus Plato: "He who, without the madness of the Muses, approaches the gates of poesy under the persuasion that by means of art he can become an efficient poet, both himself fails in his purpose, and his poetry, being that of a sane man, is thrown into the shade by the poetry of such as are mad."

So Matthew Arnold:

What poets feel not, when they make,  
A pleasure in creating,  
The world, in its turn, will not take  
Pleasure in contemplating.

So Shelley:

They learn in suffering what they teach in song.

So D. G. Rossetti:

By thine own tears thy song must tears beget.

TO come down from this high stand and make applicable to our present subject the sayings of these great men, we may say that what we should consider in giving subjects for composition is that such subjects should be those upon which the pupil has already "something to say," about which he has had practical experience, and in which he is interested. One can never find all these factors existing in the case of every member of a whole class to which one single theme is given. This is another argument on behalf of letter-writing as, at all events, a powerful adjunct to the teaching of composition. Another—and not an insignificant one—is that by this means we are enabled to a certain degree to retain and develop individuality. Few exercises are able to give to the pupil unrestrained freedom in the expression of his thoughts. And not only so, but this system of letter-writing will give the master an admirable opportunity to study the various bents which the minds he is training possess. This is no unimportant consideration. Still another argument is that most children take a keen delight in being allowed to bring before their teacher something in which they are interested, and in which they hope to interest him. This too can be used to great advantage.

WE merely throw out these few thoughts as suggestions. The study of composition is a serious one. It involves the long and careful perusal of many authors. It necessitates an accuracy in the knowledge of the precise meanings of words which is not to be gained but by deep reading and incessant study. It means the training of the mind to recognize rhythm, point, lucidity, terseness, and all the other requisites for what is known as "style." To treat it exhaustively would be the labor of a life-time.