

OLD AND NEW METHODS IN EDUCATION.

There is nothing so bad, but it contains something of good, and nothing so good, but it may be improved. The past is like viewing a distant landscape in which details are lost, and only the prominent features visible, while the present stands out in detail, and every multiplicity of detail, so much so, that more important features are unobserved.

Fifty to Seventy-five Years Ago.

To contrast methods of fifty to seventy-five years ago with existing methods, and be fair to both, would furnish material and facts for a lengthy treatise, therefore a few phases, only, can be touched upon here.

The awakening to the discussion and investigation of school questions and problems all over the country, means more than the mere statement of the fact. Confidence in our great American institution seems to be disturbed—a feeling of doubt and uneasiness is abroad. Each year finds the undercurrent of unrest enhanced, taking no very definite form of action or purpose, but constantly coming to the surface. While criticisms are, to a certain extent, healthful tokens of interest and watchfulness, surface ripples are not far-reaching and soon disappear, but a general agitation, substantially the same in all states, implies a deep seated cause for the agitation.

The test of utility, which is the growing spirit of the times, is being applied to the public school system. There was a time when it was considered the crowning glory of the commonwealth, but, during the last decade, there have been numerous hints and queries as to whether it is, or is not, a paying investment for the state; whether the quality of the output in citizenship—no one disputes the quantity—is commensurate with the enormous increase of invested capital and machinery. Comparing the census reports for 1850 and 1890, the school income has increased 3,000 per cent, the number of teachers 2,800 per cent, the pupils 300 per cent, while the population has increased only 170 per cent.

Comparisons.

There are similar lines of research which it would be interesting to follow, such as a comparison of these percentages with the increase of crime, as evidenced by the population of penitentiaries and reformatories,—if not to show that the schools are responsible for crimes, at least to demonstrate that they have not prevented an apprenticeship in vice; also to compare the increase of paupers and dependents, with officeholders and those supported by public funds, as an index of the self-reliance and self-dependence of individuals; also one might discuss such questions as: why

schools cost so much? or figure out, on a basis of dollars and cents, the wisdom of having so much idle capital, invested in school property, grounds and buildings, which are in actual use less than fourteen per cent of the time; that is, only six hours per day, five days per week, and nine, or some times ten, months in the year. A better use of existing buildings might solve some of the problems in over-crowded and congested districts.

Old Methods.

While there are temptations to branch off, we will confine the present discussion to the merits or demerits of the old and the modern methods of instruction, and the comparative results.

Under the old system, the three R's—reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic—were the Procrustean measurements for an education. Supplementary readers and reading were unknown and unthought of. The selections in the reading books were such as to inspire feelings of patriotism and inculcate moral principles, literary and rhetorical selections were the choicest and most varied specimens of style. These were read and re-read until they could be repeated verbatim, and, until the thoughts were interwoven as a part of the warp and woof of character. In writing, many a copy set by the teacher, became a life motto, and the pride and test of mental ability was, to "figure through the arithmetic" and "do the sums without asking the teacher for help" even though days and days were spent on one sum.

Results.

The result of this system was a limited range, it is true, but these lessons in self-reliance and self-dependence were of inestimable value, and the habits of application, thoroughness and accuracy, combined with a memory, well stored with thoughts and facts which were a perpetual inspiration and uplifting, constituted a cable to span the abyss between the ignorance of childhood and the business of mature life, strong enough to support the weight of accumulating experiences.

The defect of the system was its inflexibility. He who would go to school, be he old or young, no matter what the bent of mind or aptness in special lines, must adapt himself to the stereotyped scheme in vogue.

Modern Methods.

The present system has progressed at least one letter down the alphabet, for, according to a prominent educator, it is the three S's which are now the paramount issues,—snaps, slang and society. From the intermediate grades, through the advanced work, there is a too perceptible tendency to go through school with as little mental effort as possible;

to plan for the greatest number of credits, even though the studies pursued lead in diverging lines, and are utterly incongruous as to their utility or application to a future career. Any one who overhears the average conversation of the average school boys and girls, is convinced that, if there is any one subject in which American school children are deficient, it is the proper use of the English language. The outpouring of slang, the barbaric construction of sentences, the slipshod pronunciation, the slouchy articulation, cannot fail to impress the hearer, unless he is himself a regular perpetrator of linguistic crimes, that it is English and not Latin and Greek, which should be called "dead languages," for how can that be called "living" which has suffered a thousand murders, "murders most foul, strange, and unnatural?"

Social Life.

As to society, a few observations and a few notes, during the busy season, will demonstrate how large a part of interest and vitality is given by pupils to social consideration. Society, in itself, is not a bad thing. Boys and girls need their young friends and companionship, but when it must be paid for by irregular habits, late hours, nervous strain and excitement, during the period of life when nature demands extra vital force for growth, it is suicidal.

The defects of the present system are not in the quantity of what is taught, but in the quality of instruction; not what is taught, but that nothing is thoroughly inculcated, not that too little is done for the pupil, but that too much is done, enfeebling the will, memory, ambition, self-reliance. One narrows, the other enervates; one fits the pupil for a single thing, to follow a deep-cut, narrow groove, the other leaves no well-defined track.

The present superstructure is elegant, commodious, artistic, ideal in theory, but the foundation is defective; the other is chiefly foundation, little more than a basement story, but a sure and safe resort in later years, amid storms of competition and practical application of principles.

There is a possibility of the mind, falling heir to an inheritance before it can value or understand it, and familiarity breeds indifference.

Alleged Social Overwork.

There is an annual agitation against alleged overwork, especially in girls' high schools. Vague, rambling charges are made, seldom specific. Investigation by outsiders reveals the fact that the complaints most frequently come from those who have both strength and leisure to accept invitations. When growing boys and girls are robbed of two or three hours of sleep before mid-