

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

Editor Conservative:

Referring to an article in your issue of the 12th instant on the public school system in which the writer treats, at some length, of the evil effects of frequent changes and lack of permanency in the teaching force, summing up with the conclusion that nine-tenths of the evils of the schools could be traced to this source.

Of course this is a case of the potter and the clay. If experience and skill are requisite in the moulder of the jug, how much more are these qualities important in the manipulation of science whose duty it is to grade the "hill" so that Eli can get through without fatigue.

If, however, the nine-tenths of the evils he proposes to eliminate are each equal in import to the one-tenth for which he has no remedy, the whole will be found a distressingly improper and vulgar fraction.

The writer's whole scheme, however, falls into "innocuous desuetude" from the simple fact that the child, like the corn stalk, is an indigenous plant. Hence too much teacher for the one and too much rain for the other is too much of two good things.

The general disquiet, owing to unsatisfactory results of public instruction, arises from a misapprehension of the nature and functions of public schools.

When this is understood it will be found that our schools are up to the times and doing the work assigned in a manner to compare favorably with the enterprises in handicraft to which your correspondent refers. A farmer would be a fool to raise bald barley and then grumble because he had poor bread. Well, figuratively speaking, bald barley was introduced into this country and sown broadcast about the time the present generation was born. It is pretty good for isms but it never met a statesman who relished it.

To drop the figure and speak in plain language of what is called the "New Education." It got a pretty fair start in this country about 1875. It is an importation and had its origin in a laudable effort to see what could be done for the poor children of the peasantry, who had no access to public schools. After the manner of seed distribution by the Department of Agriculture, this new process was disseminated by the Bureau of Education. Literature in the form of numbered circulars was sent forth and an army of institute instructors followed to initiate teachers in the new methods and warning all that if they failed to "catch on" they would in a short time lose their jobs. The term "New Education" is a misnomer, for it is simply a device to do without it.

Hence, we have now probably the best schooled and the poorest educated period in our history and it is quite safe to say there is not an educated man or woman in the country under thirty-five who has not either been to school at all or has broken loose from its trammels and become an independent student. Of course there is more or less education going on in our schools, but what there is is incidental and results from the laws of mental philosophy and is by no means the result of class exercises in facts.

The working basis of the new education, reduced to a formula, is simply this: knowledge on the line of least resistance. I submit herewith a sample for class exercises sent out as a model for teachers to work by. You can find it in circular No. 6, issued late in the seventies. A row of little children

is called out on the floor. After all toe the mark, the teacher takes one little tot out of the row and places him a little in front of the class, putting his hand on his head, and begins: "What is this?" "A boy." "Is he a live boy?" "Yes, mam." "Can he talk?" "Yes, mam." "Can he run?" "Yes, mam." "Yes, that's right. A live boy can run, jump, skip, and play," says the teacher. The teacher then holds up a picture and asks: "What is this?" "It's a boy." "Can he talk?" "No, mam." "Can he run?" "No, mam." "Why, how is that; one boy can do everything and the other cannot do anything." With the aid of a few leading questions the mystery is solved and the class has a fact dropped into its knowledge-box that there are two kinds of boys.

Teacher: "Now, we have how many kinds of boys?" "Live boys and picture boys." "That's right." "Now, all who would like to see another kind of boy, hold up your hands." B O Y is placed on the blackboard. "What is that?" "A word." "Yes, that's a word."

"Do you know what to call it?" "No, mam." "Now, look at it sharp, and I will tell you the name of it is boy. Now, tell me how many kinds of boys there are." "Three kinds." "Yes, live boy, picture boy, word boy. Now, go to your seats and see if you can't make a word boy."

Other samples equally ridiculous, did limits suffice, could be given, all of which are remarkable for the ingenuity displayed in contriving ways and means for imparting knowledge with the least possible mental effort.

Well, a generation has grown up and we have the facts—facts galore; but unrelated facts are troublesome. With no education to place them in their proper niches, this condition breeds mental disorders. Hence we have today our Zionism, populism, fiatism and others too numerous to mention.

A. H. TRACY.

Chicago, Dec. 20, 1901.

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