

6. EXTRACTS FROM REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE OF COUNCIL ON EDUCATION. 1895.

Much attention has been given of late years to the need of giving right direction to the activity and intelligence of children, especially in the earlier stages of their school life. It is felt that one of the chief aims of education should be to train the scholar to acquire knowledge for himself by observation and experiment. This power, however, so far from being developed, is actually stunted and suppressed when the scholar is treated as the passive recipient of information. If the child does not really assimilate what he learns the natural activity of the mind is deadened, and he may leave school with healthy interests unawakened and with the faculty of accurate and independent observation still untrained. The effects of such mechanical instruction may at the moment appear satisfactory, but are, in fact, superficial and transitory, and must therefore prove in the end disappointing, if not actually harmful. We have, therefore, done what is in our power to encourage a more living form of education by means of teaching designed to cultivate the habit of observation and the further use of the various powers of expression. Dexterity of hand, correctness of eye, power with the pencil and the brush, the study of actual objects at first hand, and the habit of using the faculty of intelligent observation have, we are glad to think, all become in recent years a more important part of the educational aim of our elementary schools. Not so much because training of this kind prepares the scholar more readily to acquire in due time practical dexterity in his occupation or trade, but because it develops a many-sided interest in his school-work, and because it forms a valuable element in mental and moral discipline, and tends to the more harmonious development of the whole of a child's faculties, we have approved its introduction in various forms into the curriculum of elementary schools. Experience has already shown that this form of teaching, where wisely arranged, has been attended with success.

Not unconnected with these changes in curriculum has been the encouragement of instruction in certain subjects which specially appeal to the children because of their practical character. Cookery was taught during 1895 in 2,729 departments of schools, and 134,930 girls earned the grant which is made when the Inspectors are satisfied with the arrangements made for its practical teaching. These cookery lessons do not merely take the form of a lecture or demonstration, but the girls are also required to be taught how to cook with their own hands. There has, further, been a great increase in the number of girls learning laundry-work. Its popularity seems to be rapidly increasing, as the number of girls receiving instruction in the subject has risen from 7,238 in 1894 to 11,720 in 1895.

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The movement for the introduction of manual training into all classes of schools as a corrective to an excess of book-work seems to be gaining strength in this as in other countries. It is felt that the exercise of hand and eye, as well as of the memory and the powers of verbal expression, is necessary to true education. It appears to be true that the process of growth in a child's mind is furthered by manual training, and that the latter promotes the attainment of power and accuracy in other studies. These considerations point to a closer correlation between manual training and the other subjects of school curriculum, the former being rightly regarded as an integral part of school training, and not as an optional or disconnected appendix to it. In this wider sense the training of hand and eye finds a place in the kindergarten as well as in schools for older scholars, but in the latter case it naturally takes other forms. Varied occupations in the former class of schools, and, in the latter, brushwork, clay modelling (with special reference to lessons in history and natural science), and cardboard work, have all been found useful in stimulating the activity and developing the inventive powers of the children. But in the case of the schools for older scholars there is some danger lest manual training should be advocated and introduced less for the purpose of cultivating the general powers of the child than from a mistaken desire to impart premature dexterity in some particular craft or home employment. It is happily the case that manual training, when wisely planned, does carry with it the incidental advantage of enabling the scholar to acquire useful skill which will increase the comfort and economy of home life. Yet it is not on this side of the matter, important as it is, but on the educational value of the training that stress must be laid, if we are to escape the disappointment which followed on the excessive attention paid to narrow forms of manual instruction in the older schools of industry.

We are glad, therefore, to observe that increasing attention is being given in our public elementary schools to such subjects as cookery, housewifery, woodwork, and gardening. When properly arranged these lessons have great influence on the efficiency of the school. Many children who are backward in literary expression show a compensating aptitude for expression with their hands, and others are saved from the dangerous discouragement which sometimes forces them without desert into the dunce's place. Carpentry is a delight to most boys when they are old enough to use the necessary tools; and we have sanctioned during the past year an addition to our building rules with the object of securing that rooms for woodwork should be planned with the simplicity and economy suitable for workshops. The manual training of girls naturally takes the form of needlework, cookery, and laundry-work, and is therefore specially liable to the errors of treatment which convert what should be an educational discipline into a premature form of technical instruction. At the same time we observe with satisfaction that more thought is being given to the ways of teaching these subjects, and we are far from desiring to substitute unreal or fanciful forms of instruction for the more homely, but withal scientific, lessons which best arouse the interest of the children, because they are nearer to their personal experience of daily needs and to the actual circumstances of their home life. It is a grave blunder in a cookery lesson to ignore the humbler and more ordinary forms of food, or to provide stoves or appliances of a kind necessarily unknown in cottage life. Equally serious, on the other hand, is the mistake of giving merely rote instruction in subjects which admirably lend themselves to the teaching of the principles underlying wise action, and to the training of those powers of observation and judgment which are essential to the wise husbanding and economical employment of narrow means. We observe, however, from the general reports of the Directress of Needlework and of the Inspectress of Cookery, that much still needs to be done in order to raise the educational value of the instruction in cookery and needlework in many schools. In others, on the other hand, the teaching of cookery has been so efficient that the lessons have been found to produce a perceptible and satisfactory improvement in the homes of the working-classes.