

These figures supply the barest information of the school-work and classification of the 8,681 pupils who were entered on the schedules as belonging to the schools at the date of the annual examinations. Compared with the numbers for the previous year there was an increase of 306 pupils. If the comparison is made according to classes, there were 160 pupils in Class 7 or Standard VII. compared with 114 for the previous year. Most of the children in Class 7 do secondary work as they are under special teachers at the district high schools. The anomaly continues to exist at the Napier North School of a Standard VII. class, the children being excluded from the Napier High School as free pupils, although they would be admitted as free pupils at the Hastings or other district high schools.

The pupils in the four highest classes numbered 2,483, which shows an increase of only eight compared with the number in 1903. It will thus be seen that the increase in the school attendance during the year was made up mostly of children new to school life.

The system of examination that came into operation during the year presents so many changes, when compared with what has done duty since the passing of the first Education Act in 1877, that much of the work has been of a tentative character. Teachers in most cases strove to mould together the new and the old, but the task was a difficult one. Promotions are now in the hands of teachers themselves, and the work of the Inspector is to test the judgment of the teacher with respect to school classification and efficiency rather than to discover the strength and weakness of individual pupils. Where examinations and promotions are in the hands of teachers variations in the character and quality of the work are sure to arise. Although all pupils were examined by me as usual no alteration was made in the classification, as it seemed far better to throw the responsibility of promotion upon the teachers at once so that they might adopt their methods to the requirements of the new syllabus. With respect to Standard VI. there was a falling-off in the number of pupils for examination, and the average quality of the work was certainly below that of a few years ago. Allowance, however, must be made for what was a transitional period, and, what is of more importance, for the wider scope of work that is now required for a certificate of proficiency.

Some subjects under the new regulations are compulsory as to preparation, but are not estimated in marking the efficiency of a candidate for a pass. The list of subjects to be taken in the different classes is a formidable one, but I am not yet prepared to affirm that the constant increase in the subjects of instruction is of greater moment than thoroughness in a few. By all means let the essential work be widened, but the permit in Regulation 4 under "Inspection and Examination" does not work, in my opinion, either in the interest of a pupil or of a school. In subjects like English and arithmetic a common standard should be necessary before promotion is possible, and a leaving certificate of competency ought not to issue unless the candidate is qualified in the essential work that the certificate is supposed to represent. But this difficulty can be easily remedied. One important advantage possessed by the new scheme is the opportunity it gives for the discovery of individuality and originality among teachers. In far too many instances the teachers appear as if afraid to think out a scheme of work for themselves. The regulations, suggestive as they are in English, arithmetic, history, and geography, remain in most schools simply as the regulations that have done duty for years past. It is the old story over again. Many teachers live isolated as individuals, and become slaves to routine. The regulations merely change, but change of method and matter under such conditions cannot take place in a moment by a mere instruction or Order in Council.

As for "nature-study," it seems a very mystery of mysteries to a large proportion of the teachers. The weakness in centralised forms of government is the tendency to mechanical methods. Initiative among workers is seldom fostered, and now that more freedom is given to teachers they fail to realise what power it places in their hands, and what responsibilities the power imposes upon them. The old habits are so strong that many teachers think everything is to be learned from a book, and that "nature-study" cannot be taught without one. No doubt books are aids to the gathering of information, and as helps to scientific description, but the book that "nature-study" implies is the Book of Nature, a fair knowledge of which can be gained in every school-ground and its vicinity by training children in the habits of observation. The common weeds by the wayside, the grasses, the flowers, shrubs, insects, stones, soils in and about the school-ground present a storehouse of facts for observation and inquiry. The children see such things as wholes day by day, but they are ignorant of their names, their habits, and their uses. When children know something of realities as they appeal to them through the senses, then is the time for the book containing other experiences and other facts. A few schools only, up to the present, have shown an intelligent interest in the pursuit of "nature-study." The following remarks are made on the teaching of "nature-study" in several of the schools. The mistress of the Papakura School says, "After reading some of the leaflets issued by the Agricultural Department I thought that a study of weeds and wild flowers around us would be useful to country children. I therefore encouraged the children to gather specimens of the various plants and press them. Lessons in drawing plant-forms were then begun in all standards and took the place of our old freehand drawing copies. In Standard I., children placed a simple leaf on their slate and drew round it. Then they tried to make a freehand copy of the leaf. First attempts were, of course, very bad, but I found that the children liked the work and soon improved. Sometimes they took an impression of a leaf in plasticine and then cut it out. In Standard II., children drew simple leaves in their books—freehand—and occasionally a stem with a few leaves on it. Standards III. to VII. continued this course, so that Standards V. to VII. were able to make a good drawing of a piece of plant-form. Each pupil in the upper classes gummed one of the pressed wild flowers on a page and made a drawing of this plant beside it. The drawing was then coloured, a fresh plant having to be used as a copy when colouring, as the pressed flower often loses the beauty of its colour. The children and I gathered what information we could about each plant, its uses, habits, &c., and after a conversational lesson about it the children wrote a description of the plant on the page opposite the pressed flower and its copy. This lesson serves as a composition exercise. I have found Cassell's 'Eyes and No Eyes' series very useful for studies of plant-life and also of insect-life."