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Education

It is obviously of great advantage that our public school system should be subjected to free and thorough criticism. Its place in the life of our community is one of peculiar importance, and all who are concerned with it are desirous that it should be made as efficient as possible. As each colony devised its own plan of public education there are necessarily some divergencies of method, and nothing but the test of actual experiment can show which of the different systems the most nearly attains perfection. Their working is therefore anxiously watched by experts in the several education departments with the view of detecting both weaknesses that can be eliminated and advantages that may be profitably copied. Some time since the Victorian authorities undertook an enquiry into the relative merits of the colonial systems, with a result that was not entirely flattering to their own. Mr. Broadribb, the assistant Inspector-General, formed an exceedingly favorable estimate of what was being done in New South Wales, and his view was substantially endorsed by Messrs. Topp and Main, the Inspector-General, and principal of the Training College respectively. Their report, however, has been reported upon by Mr. J. C. Maynard, the Chief Inspector of the New South Wales Education Department, who unmistakably challenges some of its conclusions. Thus we have the criticism criticised, and that too with a somewhat singular result. While the Victorian educationists are inclined to extol the superiority of the system of another colony to which they were dispatched for the purpose of investigation the highest authority there represents their opinion as too favorable. Thus we have the singular and almost unprecedented spectacle of Victoria and New South Wales rivaling each other in self-depreciation, and, as it were, contending for the palm of modesty. Such a reversal of the normal situation is so unusual as to be almost bewildering, and the systems that are brought under the white light of criticism in this way should surely be the better for it. Almost coincidentally with the appearance of the latest comments on this topic there has appeared a criticism of our own educational affairs by Professor Boulger, whose relation to the subject, to say nothing of his attainments and abilities, entitles him to be heard with respect. The opinions formed by such observers, looking at the same subject from different sides, are of public interest and importance.

It may be remembered that the Victorian officials reported that the children in New South Wales learn more in a given time than those in Victoria; that the programme of instruction in the senior colony even in the ordinary subjects of primary education is higher than in either Victoria or South Australia; and that the system in New South Wales leads to brightness in manner and quickness of thought. Mr. Broadribb came to the conclusion that the educational system of New South Wales is a sound and beneficial one, and that as an instrument of popular instruction and mental training it is superior to our own. Messrs. Topp and Main made the statement that the percentage of children doing the most advanced work in New South Wales is rather more than double that of Victoria and nearly four times that of South Australia, the average age of such children being lowest in New South Wales and highest in Victoria.

This is all the more surprising because in the latter colony the pupils have fewer subjects to study, less space to cover in each of them, a higher class age, and are allowed eighteen months for every twelve allowed in New South Wales. Now, if these statements were accepted as unquestionably trustworthy without reference to numerous other points raised in the report, they would afford a strong temptation to reform our system on the model of that of the older colony; but, unfortunately, Mr. Maynard's criticisms leave the whole question open to doubt. He challenges the accuracy of some of the alleged facts, and succeeds fairly well in showing inconsistency between some of the conclusions. The Victorian officials say, for instance, in one place that "Instruction in elementary science is best in Victoria and least in New South Wales." Further on they add that "The instruction our scholars receive in mathematics and languages is better;" yet they also say, "If the attainments of children in Latin, French, Euclid, and Algebra are taken into account the pupils in New South Wales show the greatest proficiency." It needs no exceptionally trained vision to perceive that these statements do not hang together, and such a flaw vitiates the whole report. Mr. Maynard is very severe as to the method employed by the visiting inspectors, and roughly refuses on that account to attach any importance to their conclusions. They were instructed to examine by an age standard alone, drawing pupils from various classes without regard to attainments, length of time spent at school, or regularity of attendance. Thus pupils fresh from the bush who had scarcely had the opportunity of attending school at all and were only able to work simple sums, were put alongside others in every way more advanced and set to work at compound interest, algebra, &c. To enter a school, upset its entire organisation, draft a class for examination in the fashion indicated and then submit it to an arbitrary test, is surely a most original way of getting at the relative efficiency of rival systems. The common-sense method of dealing with the elder children who have passed through the entire curriculum, or nearly so, was entirely ignored. It is recognised by all educationists of any standing that a mere age-test by itself is not trustworthy, and Mr. Maynard is unquestionably justified in objecting to its application alone.

We are not greatly concerned as to whether New South Wales or Victoria is to rank higher in educational efficiency; but what is of more importance to ourselves is the side-light thus shed on the opinion of Messrs. Topp and Main as to our own system. The value of this opinion Mr. Maynard's criticisms tend to discount, and of the character of the educational system in this colony when fairly considered we have no reason to be ashamed. Professor Boulger, though he disclaims such intimate acquaintance with it as would enable him to feel competent to pronounce an authoritative judgment, nevertheless says he believes primary schools are teaching rudimentary subjects thoroughly and intelligently. So far as he is able to judge he regards the Education Department as being admirably worked, and the intellectual education imparted in the State schools as comparing well for thoroughness with that imparted in national schools elsewhere. Though he declines to take the rôle of a critical expert such are his impressions, and it must be evident that notwithstanding all his pro-