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THE OPPORTUNITY CLASS.

IN WORKING ORDER.

In pictures of schoolrooms 15 years ago own ideas, and each brings her own gifts, the finishing touch was always added by whether of exceptional skill in handicrafts, standing one child on a stool and fitting a special enthusiasm for teaching drawing, his head with a dunce's cap, "pour encourage or any other aptitude; the excellence being ager les autres." Most elementary schools faithfully, if faintly, reflected in the work could still produce the very model of that of her pupils in that direction. unhappy child, whose face once ran with inky tears or set hard in a mask of dull apathy through the long boredom of the day.

ARTISTIC WORK.

In the first classroom we visited the teacher was evidently artistic, as well as kind, patient, and capable as all special a harassed teacher, doing justice to the teachers may be; the was the gayest quick minds of the class, is to be excused little room, with its wall blackboards for regarding him as something of a adorned with remarkably effective draw- nuisance. Of him it has been written ings by the children of their latest geo-

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"Thou shalt not excel," and every other child in the class is perfectly aware of it. Invisible but potent, the dunce's cap is still perched on his small, dull head, acting effectively as a stopper to the stirring of any youthful ambition.

A CHANCE.

The Education Department of South Australia, as most people know, has lately provided an alternative to this policy of letting who will take care of the hind- most. The Consulting Psychologist to the Department (Dr. Constance Davey, M.A.) has formed 11 special classes for those who are unable to keep up with their schoolfellows. Special teachers, for a much deserved higher rate of pay, are placed in charge of these "opportunity classes," and the whole of the work is under the direct supervision of Dr. Davey herself. The child who, through ill health, or other reasons, has missed so much school as to be far behind other children of the same age; the child who is merely slow, but can get along very well at his own natural pace, and the child who is definitely below the normal standard of intelligence —all these are to have a chance.

One morning lately I accompanied Dr. Davey on one of her tours of inspection in order to see in working some of the ideas she expounded for the benefit of this page on her return from her term of study in England, at the Catherine Helen Spence scholar in social science.

We visited more than one class, and it was interesting to see how the work varied, though the main principles were the same everywhere. The special teachers have an opportunity to express their graphy lesson—not maps and flats, but pictures of sleds, reindeer, and Eskimos with a flaming borealis. About 16 children were working at the low desks, some at their books, others in a cooperative spelling lesson, one or two with raffia work and rug making. Instructing children so removed from each other in age, temperament, and ability, necessarily means individual teaching, and exquisite is the patience with which the teacher reply to incessant demands made on them where initiative is rare or lacking altogether.

Dr. Davey explained, in the intervals of personally examining the work of the children, every one of whom she knew by name, that they are selected by her in the "mental survey" of the schools by means of intelligence tests. Each class is limited to 20, and there is not yet room for nearly all the backward children.

ALL-ROUND DEVELOPMENT.

The children themselves were all neat, tidy, and interested. Their books also bore eloquent witness to the endless patience which had been brought to bear in encouraging neatness. This is a strong point in all opportunity classes, for through insistence on tidy books the children are taught thoroughness, a habit which may eventually make up in their work in life what it lacks in brilliance and speed. Work is divided, as nearly as possible, into three equal parts—ordinary school work, handicrafts, and physical training. All ordinary school work is presented in as simple and concrete a way as possible. Bill sums, for instance, come not in the terrifying guise of rows of incomprehensible figures, but are pleasantly managed with grocers' samples with which to play shop and real prices with which to conjure. For singing, this particular teacher had evolved a scheme of writing the music on the board in a grapevine form of ups and downs, so that he who runs may read. With this help the children sang to us, with a beaming pride in their achievement, a verse or two of a Christmas carol.

To another school the young teacher plainly excelled in handicrafts, and the rug making and raffia work, the sewing and carpentry of the children were particularly creditable.

Two little boys in this class were a good illustration of opportunity school principles. Rather bright-looking little chaps they were, with the childish form and face of eight years old, though, as a matter of fact, their age is 11. When they first came to the school they could, or would, do nothing whatever but model in clay. One day it was suggested to them that they should model "S" for snake; after which they modelled the whole alphabet, and then demanded fresh worlds to conquer. Modelling with figures led them insensibly into the foreign world of arithmetic, and finally they demanded pencils and set to work in earnest.

COMRADESHIP.

Almost all types but those of brilliancy and imbecility are represented in the classes, and it is a little touching to see the with the democracy of childhood, those who are merely retarded through ill health or accident, see no difference in their duller fellows. Gentle mess reigns in the special classes, for not only do they take their tone from the patient teacher, but the duller children themselves are particularly kind and affectionate. It is this, their teacher say, which affords compensation after the first trying months, for the arduous ness of their task. Delinquent subnormal children are not included in the opportunity classes, for not only do they need a stricter discipline, but the danger of corrupting the class is greater than any benefit the delinquent child would gain.

WIDER NEEDS.

The whole scheme of the opportunity classes is only part of a much wider scheme which Dr. Davey has presented to the Advisory Council of Education for dealing with the problem of the feeble-minded in the community. In an ideal opportunity class there would not be the mixture of accidentally retarded children with those who are definitely below normal standards of intelligence. More important still, there would be classification of the backward themselves. Those unable to profit by ordinary school work at all, would be drafted into special schools, where they could be trained to do some kind of useful work, and developed physically and morally. The hereditary defectives would be segregated in a special farm colony. Delinquent children would have a school of their own. Children from the opportunity classes, who did not go back to the ordinary school, would be sent, when they had gone as far as they could in school work, to a vocation training centre. As an illustration of the need for this, two opportunity class girls left school the other day and went to work in a laundry. They were good girls, and if they had been trained in laundry work would have made splendid workers. As it was, they were dismissed after two days, because the laundry authorities, very naturally, were not prepared to take the special pains necessary to train them. Drifting from one job to another, such children, who might become useful members to the community, become instead a burden to it.

HOPE.

Meanwhile, the opportunity class does a work that is unique. Children who come to it utterly dull and apathetic from a dreary round of foregone failure, brighten amazingly in its atmosphere and show marked improvement. Many of them are able to go back to the ordinary class and take their place with those of their own age. But when the time comes for leaving the special class, they quit very unwillingly the place where, for the first time in their lives, they have known opportunity and tasted success.

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AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Additional Government Grant.

Approved by Legislative Council.

Without any opposition, the Legislative Council on Tuesday passed the Bill to provide an additional grant to the University for the promotion of research in agriculture.

The Minister of Agriculture (Hon. J. Cowan), who moved the second reading, explained that the grant was to increase annually from £5,000 in 1927-28 to £15,000 in 1936-37.

The Hon. Sir David Gordon warmly approved the measure, and commended the Government for its introduction. Science had caused wonderful development to be made in agriculture within a comparatively few years, he said, and it was impossible to see the work being done at Urrbrae without realizing that it would add greatly to the production of the country, and that the community would have a lot for which to thank Mr. Peter Waite. Australia must look to increased production for its future financial stability, for only in that way could her exports be increased. Sir David concluded with a suggestion that the Government should encourage interested people by exempting from income taxation any gift that might be made to any institution such as the University or Urrbrae.

The Hon. W. G. J. Mills supported the measure, and thought it was time some thing was done to deal with agricultural pests.

The Hon. J. Jelley was also favourable, but hoped the money would be wisely spent. Such institutions did most valuable work, but needed watching.

The Hon. T. McCallum expressed himself as not being so enthusiastic about the Bill as some other members, and agreed with Mr. Jelley that the matter needed watching. He would, however, vote for the measure.

The Hon. T. Pascoe said it was not to be expected that every experiment made at such institutions would be successful, for it was from some of the failures that the most valuable knowledge was secured. He supported the Bill.

The Hon. J. H. Cooke said year by year science was producing results which were of great benefit to the community. If it was possible to make the soil produce twice as much as at present, then there must exist a wastage of capital and labour. A farmer growing wheat could not be assisted by a tariff, but could be assisted materially by research work. He congratulated the Government on the Bill.

The Hon. W. H. Harvey contended that if South Australia was to go ahead, it must receive help from those engaging into agricultural research, and in that respect he paid a tribute to the officers at the Waite Institute.

The second reading was carried, the Bill was taken through all its stages, and passed.