

Secondary Schools and Examinations.¹

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THE public schools and the great day schools of the nineteenth century were inspired both in regard to curriculum and method by Oxford and Cambridge, and they were largely classical; a reaction against this undue narrowness led to the experiment of the organised science schools of the last ten years of that century. These in their turn certainly carried the reaction too far, and produced juvenile chemists and physicists without culture or general education. In 1904 the Board of Education issued its first regulations for secondary schools, and sought something broader than either of these two rival institutions; they established a four-year course in which English, geography, and history, at least one language other than English, mathematics, science, and drawing should be studied, together with manual work, physical exercises, and, for girls, housewifery. As that course has been worked in practice in the last twenty-five years, it has been in the main academic in spirit, and the important subjects have come to be the native tongue, the foreign language or languages, and mathematics and science; the schools have continued to look to the universities, and to the development of those advanced courses which lead up to university studies. All this effort has been directed and stabilised, and some would say stereotyped, by the setting up of the system of school certificates, for which in England and Wales eight university authorities examine. All the secondary schools, therefore, have in the main the same outlook, which is primarily that each pupil should at the end of the first stage of the course be able to matriculate at a university; the school certificates have been brought into relation with the matriculation examinations, and the system is now organised in all its details.

Meantime the number of schools, and the number of pupils at each school, have greatly increased. In 1904 in England the number of secondary schools for boys, for girls, and for boys and girls together was 575; there are now 1184 recognised for grant by the Board of Education, and 305 recognised as efficient, but not eligible for grant. In 1904 the number of pupils was 97,698; in October 1927 it was 349,430, and if you add the 57,655 in the schools not eligible for grant you get a total of 400,000 boys and girls who are in England pursuing a course of secondary education. While the content of secondary education has not changed, and remains academic in spirit and outlook, the number of schools has more than doubled, and the number of pupils has increased by more than four times. To put it clearly in another way, in the first year in which the school certificates examination was held, there were 14,232 candidates; for the last one for which figures are available there were 54,593, again very nearly an increase of four times.

The result of pouring all this mass of new

material into a single mould has produced a slowly increasing volume of protest, but those who protest are much more sure in describing the symptoms of the distresses of the secondary schools than they are in pointing to their cause or in finding the cure. It is said that there is a good deal of overstrain among the pupils of the secondary schools, particularly among the girls, and that for the average, the effort of reaching a satisfactory level in English and English subjects, in a foreign language or languages, and in mathematics and sciences is too much.

That this is so is shown by the fact that when the examination was established it was supposed that nearly all would be successful at the end of their course in obtaining a school certificate, but as a matter of experience less than two out of three have been able to do so. It is alleged that the examination hampers the freedom of the teacher, who during the whole four years' course can never turn aside to browse in the pleasant paths of literature or to pursue interests common to himself and his class, but must concentrate the attention of his class and himself wholly upon what will pay in the examination room. Great schoolmasters of the past are quoted who could never have pursued their favourite methods with success under present conditions. It is asserted that for many boys, and for still more girls, the present curriculum is unsuitable, that they are not all, or indeed comparatively many, of them going to the universities, and that they ought not to be sacrificed to the interests of the few who do contemplate that course. The question is raised whether as a matter of fact the intellectual training of the girl ought to be the same as that of the boy, and whether the tyranny of imposing the preparatory curriculum of the university upon the girls is not even more unreasonable than it is asserted to be in the case of the boys. On this point the committee which reported on the differentiation of the curricula as between the sexes spoke with an uncertain voice, probably because they knew that there were many feminine associations ready to tear and devour any committee or any individual who said anything which might be taken to imply that women were not the full equals of men, and girls of boys.

The practical outcome of all this is the suggestion that boys and girls should be awarded a school certificate even if they omit a foreign language entirely, or mathematics and science entirely, so long as they make up for it by proficiency in subjects such as music, art, handicraft, housecraft, and other subjects of more motley character and more dubious claim. On this proposal the English teaching profession is divided, the Headmasters' Conference and the Assistant Masters' Association being against it, the Headmasters' Association doubtfully in favour, and the Headmistresses' Association and the Assistant Mistresses almost as one woman in favour also. From this state of affairs one can judge where the shoe pinches most, but there is no

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doubt that it does pinch, and anyone who remembers the figures which I have just quoted will quite readily understand why. There are more boys and girls taking the full secondary course to-day than are either fit for it or fitted by it. The malcontents are quite right in the criticisms which they level against the system and its results, but they are in my opinion wrong as to the nature of the cure and the method by which they would bring it about.

The standard of secondary education in England is high, and is something of which we have a right to be proud. Its methods and objects are the fruit of long experience and of the efforts of several generations. The boy or girl who has taken a school certificate before the age of sixteen, followed an advanced course, or specialisation in a sixth form, to the age of 18+, has reached a level attained in few educational systems other than our own. I question, indeed, whether any country is producing boys and girls of as high a level of intellectual excellence and training as those hundreds who go up every year to compete for scholarships and places at Oxford and Cambridge. I believe this to be true of the boys, and it is certainly true of the girls. This system is now built on the general education of the school certificate and the specialised education of the higher certificate, and I hold that it should stand unimpaired, and not be tampered with; for it is far easier to relax a standard than ever to recover it. To say that every boy and girl who goes to a secondary school for four years should be awarded the same certificate, whatever subjects they may have studied and offered, is to say that things which are not equal to one another are equal to the same thing; it is to say that the boy who has been successful in English, history, geography, Latin, French, mathematics, and science is *prima facie* the same article as the boy who has been successful in English, general elementary science, drawing, handicraft, and shorthand, or the girl who has offered English, botany, music, drawing, and needlework.

I am not representing either course as better than the other; one may be right for *A* and the other for *B*. I hold no brief to argue that the high-brow is better than the low-brow, or the blue stocking than the flesh-coloured stocking. All that I maintain is that they are palpably not the same, that it is illogical therefore to call them the same, and that nothing but confusion will result from calling them the same. It may be democratic and in accordance with the spirit of the age to hold that we are all the same as one another, and ought therefore to be labelled with the same labels; but no man who has taught a class for one term can really hold that Nature gives any warrant to such nonsense. Surely the logical course is to award two kinds of certificate, one which shall fulfil the academic conditions and maintain unlowered the existing system which causes no difficulty to the boy or girl of average academic ability, and the other which shall be a proof that the boy or girl has taken at school that course of education which in the particular case was the most fitted.

I would therefore have in any secondary school

these two types definitely recognised to be different, not superior or inferior, the one to the other, but different. It would be recognised at the school certificate stage by one type sitting for the school certificate awarded as it now is, and the other for a general certificate which shall show that they have made good use of a good and sensible type of education. If they stay at school, one type will continue to go on to the higher certificate, again organised as it now is, and the other to a second certificate, which shall again test the subjects of a quite unspecialised education, designed to meet the individual need in each case. There will then be a good deal of variety inside secondary education, and when the central schools become more numerous and more organised, and the modern schools come into existence in increasing quantity, there will be a good deal of variety outside the old secondary schools as well.

Even so my discussion of the problem of the right curriculum for the higher forms of the secondary school is not complete. In saying that the standard should remain unimpaired, and not be tampered with, I have in mind the work of the best boys and girls. But many more than the best go on to the universities, and it is right that they should do so; I am not convinced that any of these should attempt specialised study before they enter the classes of the university. On one hand, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, through their open scholarship examinations, enforce on the schools the attempt to reach a very high standard along narrow lines; some universities, by allowing their intermediate examinations to be taken through the higher certificate, confuse the courses proper to themselves and to the schools; some universities admit their students too early; the higher certificate courses themselves often involve specialisation built on a very slender foundation of general knowledge. On the other hand, many professors and university teachers are loud in their condemnation of the state in which their pupils come to them, with minds ill-balanced and ill-furnished. I submit that this region of the last two years of school is insufficiently explored, and the nature of the work that should be done by the average student not thought out. I submit further that it is a matter which might well engage the attention of all the universities of the country in conference. They have perhaps no common mind, but I do not know that they have attempted to arrive at one: they have never clearly stated what they want; they have never faced the fact that through their scholarships they make extreme specialisation necessary, and through their professors complain of the result. I regard the matter as urgent, for as chairman of the Secondary Schools Examination Council, I know that the curriculum and the examinations proper to this later period of school life stand in great need of definition, and that in proceeding to the work, which cannot long be deferred, we have no clear guidance from the universities as to what they really want.

However, it is not only in the secondary schools that some thinking needs to be done about the

requirements of the immediate future ; there is also some advance that needs to be made, after due thought, in that very complicated field which is known as technical and further education. Technical education is a field which has been developed all by itself, and in isolation from almost everything else. Each part has grown to meet a need, and usually a local need. It is cut off from the elementary education which precedes it, for elementary and technical education have been controlled by different departments of the Board of Education, and it is cut off from the university education, which in the case of the best students ought to follow. There is frequently a gap of one, two, or even more years between the end of the elementary course and the beginning of technical instruction, and that instruction is frequently sterilised by the fact that students have come to it tired, late in the evening, and in the centre of cities. Finally, there is need of much fuller contact, of more mutual knowledge and sympathy, not only between technical education and industry, but also between all forms of industry and commerce and all forms of education. There ought to be a full inquiry into this difficult and complicated problem ; educationists ought to know and consider more thoroughly what is wanted, and employers ought to take much more trouble to find out what is being done.

There is a large question of very general interest which I can state, though I do not know that I can supply an answer. What is the proper part which formal and external examination should play in our educational courses ? Examinations at the present time play a very large part. In a great many places there is competition and examination for scholarships and for free places at the secondary schools ; some four years later there follows the school certificate, theoretically for all. One or two years later follows the higher certificate examination, and then there are for some all the university and professional examinations in prospect. Entrance to the public schools is obtained by an examination known as the Common Entrance Examination, which is said in some cases to be competitive, but in all cases involves the reaching by the candidate of a certain definite standard. Competitive examination admits to the Army, Navy, and the Civil Service. The system is so thorough and so universal that the victim, if that is the right word, may never be out of the shadow of an examination from eleven years old to twenty-three, or even later. It is argued, first, that this gives almost inevitably a totally wrong view of knowledge, and makes a boy or a girl from school days on feel that his or her object is not to study a subject, but to acquire the capacity to answer on paper examination questions about it, and that therefore, once examinations are over, he or she learns no more. It is argued, secondly, that the teacher's freedom is destroyed, since he has to teach his subject not in the best way, but in the way which will pay best in the examination, and that the more inspiring, original, and fresh he is in presentment, the less he is likely to succeed on a mechanical system. It is alleged, thirdly, that the

system is really unsuccessful, that it picks out for honour those who have the examination faculty and can write fast and to the point, but that, judging by what happens in after-life, it does not really pick the best men and women, and those who will go furthest in their study.

There is a certain amount of truth, but a good deal of unreasonableness and lack of practical common sense, in all this attack which is so frequently made to-day. My own profession, the schoolmasters, are not consistent, though the schoolmistresses dispute the palm with them, for they insist on a certificate to mark the successful completion of all their courses, and do not rest until all the subjects which they teach have been brought, for example, within the ambit of the school certificate. The subjects which of all others ought to be the most free, and are in my opinion in their own interests least examinable—music and art—are, I suppose, the means for awarding more certificates by examination than any other, and the blame for this I lay largely at the door of my professional brothers and sisters. It is not, I think, seriously true that teachers are cramped by the examinations ; on the whole, examinations follow the school curricula, and do not control them ; the teachers, moreover, are well represented on the examining authorities, and can make their voices heard. It is not possible to say whether a boy or girl knows a subject save by asking questions ; these must be the same for all, answered under the same conditions in the same time, and that makes a written examination necessary. No one suggests that examinations are more than they are, a very human and sometimes fallible means of finding out whether a candidate knows what he ought to know, and no one in his senses claims that they pick out the person who will be ultimately the most successful. What is true is that in early years they tend to dull the edge of the desire for true knowledge, and that throughout school life there are plenty who are quite incapable of showing on paper what they have in their head ; they are not fools, though they may be written down as such, but they are bad examinees. Moreover, in any system of examination which is more or less universal—as is the case with the school certificate—we have to think of the dull and of the slow developers, who suffer badly when they are crammed and forced to an unnatural level.

I believe, therefore, though the time is not yet, that the right course will be to abolish all external examination for the average boy and girl, though leaving it as the avenue to the universities and the professions. In the case of the average boy and girl, the properly inspected and efficient school will issue its own certificate that *A* or *B* has attended for four or six years as the case may be, and has reached a satisfactory level of performance. The power to make such an award implies a high standard of professional honour, and perhaps a higher level of efficiency than yet exists, but it would enable the schools to teach a pupil what he could learn, to teach him in the right way, and not drive him in the wrong way to a wrong standard.