

Weak-minded children.

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WEAK-MINDED CHILDREN.

In the last number we advocated certain intermediate schools for the weak-minded (Jan., 1888, p. 552). We are glad to receive the support of so experienced and intelligent an authority as Dr. Shuttleworth, the medical superintendent of the Royal Albert Asylum, Lancaster, who communicates the following observations upon *The Education of Children of abnormally weak mental capacity* :—

The reference in the last number of "The Journal of Mental Science" to the "auxiliary" schools established in Germany for exceptionally backward children* may serve to draw attention to an important hiatus in our English educational system. Whilst exceptionally quick children are in every rank of life well provided for, and amongst the poor facilities for higher education are given (at any rate, in large towns) in connection with the Board Schools, no systematic effort has so far been made in this country for the special training of those children whose abnormally weak mental capacity renders it impossible for them to keep pace with the requirements of "the code." It is true that the institutions for imbeciles and idiots are intended for the education and training of the class designated in America as "feeble-minded," as well as, or perhaps more than, of cases of graver mental defect; but considering the paucity of such institutions, and the undesirability of stigmatizing as *idiotic*, or even as *imbecile*, children who are not irretrievably deficient, the plan of auxiliary classes and schools deserves serious consideration by our educators. It may be of service in this connection to quote from an excellent paper by Herr Kielhorn, of Brunswick, which appeared in the "Zeitschrift für die Behandlung Schwachsinniger und Epileptischer" for March, 1887. "The auxiliary school," he says, "is designed for such children as after a trial of at least two years in a town school (*i.e.*, public elementary school) have not been able to be promoted, so that an equal progress with their school-companions is impossible. On the other hand, those children

* Occasional Notes of the Quarter, p. 552.

are excluded from attendance at the auxiliary school who, in consequence of too low mental capacity, or of too great bodily infirmity, or of insufficient domestic care, are better assigned to a special institution. . . . The school consists of three progressive classes; a division of the sexes only comes in as regards certain departments of instruction. The subjects of instruction are:—Religion (Scripture history, catechism, hymns), the German language (reading, orthography, scripthead), calculation, writing, cultivation of the perceptions, domestic knowledge, singing, gymnastics, manual work.

“In the auxiliary school it is essential to develop in every way the combined mental and bodily powers of the children to the utmost extent possible, to train them to useful activity, to mannerly living, to elevated enjoyments—in fine, to an existence worthy of human beings. As the teacher must specially adapt himself to the peculiarities of each child, and, having regard to the small mental capacity of his pupils, make sure by constant repetition of what has been learned, the scope of instruction must necessarily be restricted.”

There follows a detailed account of the course of instruction pursued, which in its main features resembles that in vogue in our imbecile institutions, stress being laid upon the cultivation of the senses and the perceptive faculties, exercises in distinct articulation, objective illustrations of all lessons, especially in connection with calculation, and finally the training of the hand for simple industry. In the discussion which followed the reading of Herr Kielhorn's paper at the Frankfort Conference, testimony was borne to the utility of the auxiliary classes in connection with the public elementary schools at Gera by Dr. Bartels, who insisted on the high qualifications requisite for the successful teacher of such classes. He refers also to the dictum of the Minister of Education (von Gössler) that auxiliary classes should be instituted in every town of 20,000 inhabitants and upwards. Another speaker (Horny, of Nassau) related how in his city it had been necessary to change the name of the classes which had originally been designated for “idiots,” first to classes for “weak-minded” (Schwachsinnige), and then (to prevent misunderstanding) to classes for “children of feeble faculties” (Schwachbefähigte). This would seem to have been a nominal concession to the sensitiveness of parents.

Similar classes have for some time past been established

in Norway, and I am indebted to my friend, Herr J. A. Lippestad, Director of the Thorshang Institute, who founded such classes in 1874, for some interesting particulars with reference to those in operation in Christiania. He tells me that in this city the "abnormal" children in public elementary schools bear a ratio to the ordinary school children of .4 per cent. (60 : 15,000), and that there are, besides, thirty children belonging to the city in special institutions for the feeble-minded. The classes are held each afternoon in two of the public schools, distant not more than a mile and a half from the homes of the pupils. These are selected from the ordinary scholars upon the report of the teachers made to the head-master, who thereupon confers with the Director of the Auxiliary Classes as to the necessity for special instruction in each case. The requisite funds are provided through the School Board, and the annual cost is about £6 15s each pupil. The children attending these classes may be divided into four categories, viz. :—

I. Those who after two or three years' special teaching can be brought back into the ordinary school.

II. Those who continue in these classes, can be brought to confirmation.

III. Those for whom these classes are found insufficient. Such, after being tried for a time, are sent to special imbecile institutions.

IV. The utterly ineducable, who, after full trial, are dismissed to their homes.

Special teachers are employed for these classes, who have been trained for the purpose at institutions for feeble-minded children.

Similar auxiliary classes are conducted in connection with the public schools of Bergen by Herr Soethre, also director of an institution for imbeciles.

With such practical Teutonic and Scandinavian precedents, there would seem ample encouragement for the movement in favour of schools for "intermediate cases of mental feebleness" in London and other large towns. I ventured in 1884, at the Conference on School Hygiene held at the Health Exhibition in London, to suggest that* a "school should be established in every large centre for the backward children who were not able to bear the strain of the ordinary curriculum. After a certain time spent in such a special school a selection might be made, and some would be fit to

* "Health Exhibition Literature," Vol. xi., p. 560.

enter an ordinary school, whilst others ought to be sent to a special training school for feeble-minded children." Again, at the Conference on "Education under Healthy Conditions," held at Manchester in 1885, under the presidency of Lord Aberdare, I took occasion to suggest* that in that city the experiment of either a central school, or special school departments, for exceptional children might advantageously be tried. It appears to me that such a school would have a distinct sphere of usefulness, apart alike from the common school and the imbecile institution. In not a few cases, as has been proved in Christiania, the pupils would be so far improved by special instruction as to enable them again to take their places in the ordinary school, whilst in others the natural reluctance of parents to send their children to imbecile institutions would be overcome when it had been demonstrated that even special instruction in auxiliary classes was not in their case sufficient. For my part I think, considering how much depends upon training out of school hours, as well as in school, in effecting the lasting amelioration of weak-minded children, that for many (if not the majority) of the cases, the institution would be more beneficial than the auxiliary school, especially where the home-surroundings are unfavourable. The physical aspects of the subject, moreover, must not be overlooked, and there can be no doubt that many of the ill-results attributed to "over-pressure" are, in fact, due to "under-feeding." Still, auxiliary classes might be supplemented by other benevolent agencies for improving the home and supplying extra nutrition (as, indeed, is already done in the form of free breakfasts, halfpenny dinners, &c.). The cost of such classes would no doubt be considerable, for the instruction, to be effectual, must be more or less individualized, and well-trained teachers must be well paid. But surely what a poor country like Norway can do, wealthy England can afford. In the long run the result, taking into account the remunerative industry of restored pupils, would probably be on the side of economy. But apart from mere economic considerations, is it not the duty of a professedly Christian nation, even in relation to our educational systems, to "gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost?"

* "Proceedings of the Conference on Education under Healthy Conditions, 1885," p. 219. (Manchester, John Heywood.)