

# Childhood's Sole Serious Business

## THE LONG HAUL TO FULL SCHOOL ATTENDANCE



ALTHOUGH ROLLO ARNOLD REFERS TO A 'STRIKING SUCCESS' in achieving attendance and to the 'relatively quick and easy triumph of the common school in rural New Zealand', a UNESCO study suggests that it was 1914 before 'the battle of compulsory education' was finally won.<sup>1</sup> These apparently contradictory comments tell different parts of the same story about an institution which became a central influence on the lives of New Zealand children. The idea that all childhoods should include at least an elementary schooling was already well-established when the Education Act was passed in 1877, and most Pakeha parents sent their children — more or less regularly — to school thereafter. It would, however, be another generation before all children, including Maori, were required to go to school every day, not after a battle but certainly after some tactical manoeuvres and mopping-up operations. Progress towards universal school attendance depended on the establishment of hundreds of small schools in rural areas, on boarding and travel allowances, on the efforts of truant officers and on the growing acceptance of the belief that schooling should be the sole serious business of childhood. How much schooling particular children got depended on families' economic circumstances and parents' aspirations for their sons and daughters.

The 1877 Act's attendance requirements assumed that a certain amount of absenteeism was inevitable and that some children might go unschooled. Pakeha children with access to a school were only required to attend half the time it was open. Those obliged to go to school could meet that requirement at a private school, but private schools were not obliged to make their registers available to truant officers until 1901. Isolation and the disaffection caused by warfare in the North Island meant that few Maori children went to school in the 1870s, and neither the Education Act nor the Native Schools Act 1867 compelled Maori to go to school at all.<sup>2</sup>

By the 1920s, only the most severely handicapped went unschooled and absenteeism meant something was wrong somewhere — wilfully neglectful parents or economic circumstances so awry that parents had to rely on their children's unpaid labour. And, to take education officials' claims in the early twentieth century at face value, poor attendance could leave children unprepared for citizenship and physically underdeveloped for lack of civics classes, manual training, school games, systematic physical drill and examination by the School Medical Service.<sup>3</sup>

The Education Act's modest requirements would have been unrealistic had the former provinces, particularly those in the North Island, not made considerable advances in education. The European census, which included questions on education from 1861 to 1921, recorded these advances and those

following the establishment of a national system of primary schools. Just over 50% of New Zealand children aged 5 to 15 were attending a day school at the 1861 census (see Table 1) but there was considerable variation between provinces (see Table 2).<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1:** European pupils at New Zealand schools

	Public primary schools	Other schools	Sunday schools	Taught at home
1861	4650	5091	7959	-
1871	14,953	16,757	28,601	-
1878	62,886	14,611	62,273	9706
1886	110,644	14,948	99,884	7597
1896	133,364	17,600	104,934	6352
1906	135,934	24,686	107,756	4591
1916	178,824	50,379	-	4318

Pupils as percentage of European population aged 5–15

	Public primary schools	Other schools	Sunday schools	Taught at home
1861	24.7	27.0	42.2	-
1871	27.3	30.6	52.2	-
1878	59.7	13.9	59.2	9.2
1886	72.9	9.9	65.8	5.0
1896	77.8	10.3	67.7	3.7
1906	76.8	13.9	67.5	2.6
1916	77.1	21.2	-	1.9

**Table 2:** European children at school as a percentage of the population aged 5–15

	1861	1871	1878	1886
Auckland	52.6	53.4	75.7	83.1
Taranaki	61.0	54.4	66.7	76.3
Wellington	53.2	53.2	71.3	80.9
Hawke's Bay	23.0	60.0	60.6	78.0
Nelson	74.4	68.2	73.2	82.0
Marlborough	25.1	37.1	63.3	74.6
Westland*	-	68.4	91.1	89.5
Canterbury	50.6	50.6	76.5	84.2
Otago–Southland	38.8	67.4	71.6	84.1
New Zealand	51.7	57.9	73.6	82.8

\*Included with Canterbury in 1861.

Most children who went to Sunday school in 1861 also attended day schools, but 2831 of them went to Sunday school only. Did early New Zealand Sunday schools, like their British forerunners, teach some children to read and, perhaps, to write? David Keen could find no clear evidence of such instruction in early Otago Sunday schools.<sup>5</sup> J.L. Ewing, however, suggested that Wellington Sunday schools only dropped this secular function as day schools increased; and J.C. Dakin noted that some early Nelson day schools began as Sunday schools and that failed day schools often reverted to Sunday schools.<sup>6</sup> A set of primers found in a rural church in the Selwyn district suggests that some Canterbury Sunday schools also taught reading.<sup>7</sup>

The disparities between provinces revealed by the 1861 and 1864 census returns provided arguments for and against a national system which would benefit some provinces but might jeopardise others' gains, and William Fox's Education Bill 1871 foundered on southern opposition and religious issues. The last four years of the provincial system, however, saw laggard provinces put their educational houses in better order and the North Island made what Arnold terms a 'Great Leap Forward'.<sup>8</sup> Tables 1 and 2 show that marked increase in school attendance in the last few years before the Education Act and a noticeable reduction in the differences between provinces in the provision of school places. Without such growth, Arnold concluded, the 1877 Act would have been 'more like a gesture of hope than a programme of immediately practical possibilities'.<sup>9</sup>

Those possibilities included putting schools within reach of most children and, for the first time, compelling attendance. The compulsory clauses of the Education Act 1877 drew on the relevant sections of Fox's failed bill (which had an evident debt to the British Elementary Education Act 1870) and on the State of Victoria's Education Act 1872. Children aged 5 to 13 who lived within two miles of a public school were required to attend but they could be exempt on various grounds: 'efficient or regular instruction' at home or in a private school; sickness, infirmity or 'other unavoidable cause'; roads 'not sufficiently passable'; and having reached a specified standard of education (set by regulation at Standard 4).<sup>10</sup> The compulsory clauses, however, only came into effect in a school district if its school committee so resolved, and George Buckley spoke for a number of members when he told Parliament in 1877 that this local option would make the compulsory clauses 'worthless . . . a mere sham' because committee members would not proceed against neighbours, relatives or customers.<sup>11</sup>

Lack of school accommodation also helped make committees reluctant to compel attendance. Free schooling brought children flooding into Otago schools. A considerable number of them had to be turned away in March 1878, and the board was obliged to rent space in Dunedin and in some of the larger towns and villages.<sup>12</sup> The North Canterbury Education Board reported in 1880 that only eight committees in that district had put the compulsory clauses into effect: 'In several cases the committees allege want of sufficient school accommodation and funds as reasons for leaving these clauses in abeyance.'<sup>13</sup>

In order to meet the demand for school places in remote areas, some boards resorted to aided (or 'household') schools or to half-time schools. Aided schools

were private initiatives in 'outlying districts which it would be premature or inconvenient to constitute school districts'.<sup>14</sup> Education boards could assist with 'books, school apparatus or money, as the Board shall think expedient' provided that the school complied with the sections of the Act requiring public schools to be free and secular and to follow the official syllabus. Household schools were conducted in spare rooms, whares and cottages and their pupils were often from only one or two families. Their teachers usually received bed and board in addition to a pittance in cash. Some teachers were older sisters, but education boards were generally wary of this arrangement and some declined to approve it. Boards also heard complaints from some teachers who were not members of the families they boarded with that they were expected to work as domestic servants when not teaching.

The Marlborough Education Board made most use of aided schools; in 1901, 30 of the colony's 92 aided schools were in Marlborough, many of them in the Sounds. The chairman of the Marlborough Board told a 1901 commission on salaries that his board had employed a few 'out at elbows' men unable to find other employment, but most aided school teachers were untrained girls and very few children from aided schools passed Standards 5 or 6.<sup>15</sup> Sir Francis Gordon Bell's memoirs, however, describe a successful Marlborough aided school on his parents' North Bank run in the Wairau Valley. His mother, who had been a teacher, was too busy to attend to Bell's education and his father decided that 'the answer was a governess'.<sup>16</sup> His teacher, Myra Keys, is recorded in the Department of Education's reports in the 1890s as a state school teacher in charge of the North Bank School with three pupils and an annual salary of £15.<sup>17</sup> She taught Bell and his two sisters in a cob cottage a few minutes' walk from the main station buildings and gave them music lessons on the homestead piano after school.

Teachers in half-time schools were better qualified than aided school teachers and more often male. There were 100 pairs of such schools in 1904; 71 of their teachers had Departmental certificates and 59 of them were men.<sup>18</sup> The Auckland Education Board, which made more use of half-time schools than any other board, controlled 36 of the 1904 pairs. Some Auckland teachers worked week about, some taught three days at one school and two days at the other, and some teachers opened each school for three days and got extra pay for working on Saturdays.<sup>19</sup> The Department noted that some parents disliked half-time schools, 'the feeling being that their children receive only half what is their due'.<sup>20</sup> Other parents were happy with an arrangement that left children plenty of time to help at home. In any case, half-time schools, like aided schools, brought formal education to places where children might otherwise have gone without it.

Both makeshifts reflected a widespread demand for schools which education boards were hard pressed to meet, particularly when building grants were cut back during the economic depression of the 1880s. Large classes in urban schools and the growing use of pupil-teachers, however, enabled boards to generate surpluses which subsidized the building and operation of small schools, and between 1877 and 1900 the number of schools in the colony increased at an average of 40 a year. Putting schools within walking or riding distance of as

many children as possible resulted in hundreds of small schools. At the end of 1904, more than two-thirds of public primary schools had only one teacher or a 'head teacher' whose staff consisted of a single pupil-teacher.<sup>21</sup>

Every rural Pakeha settlement demanded its own school, although settlers' motives could vary. Having a school made it easier to attract married labour and schools were generally thought to increase land values. In 1912, the secretary of the Wellington Education Board reported that 'practical men, acquainted with country conditions' had told him that gaining a school added 15–20s. an acre to the value of small farms in a district.<sup>22</sup> A school also gave a small community a public building which could be used for meetings, church services and social occasions.

Getting a school was one thing, sending children every day was quite another when bad weather, difficult roads and farm or domestic work all affected school attendance. While a number of MHRs dismissed the compulsory clauses of C.C. Bowen's bill as ineffective, other politicians predicted hardship should committees enforce them. Poor parents would suffer, Joseph Tole warned, if 'children at a serviceable age are compelled to go to school'.<sup>23</sup> The necessities of life had to be secured, Vincent Pyke argued, before one could 'venture on the luxury of education'.<sup>24</sup> Such comments were a realistic appraisal of children's economic contribution to the establishment and operation of small farms.<sup>25</sup> In dairying districts, Edward Wakefield wrote in the 1880s, 'Those farmers are the most comfortably off, indeed, who have a stout wife and growing family of boys and girls.'<sup>26</sup> A contributor to *Brett's Colonists' Guide* was prepared to put a cash value on unpaid rural labour. How much working capital did a new farmer need? 'A practical farmer need not be afraid if he has a capital of from £3 to £5 per acre. The smaller sum will do, if he has a working family to help in the general operations of the farm.'<sup>27</sup>

Historians' accounts of child labour on farms might imply that attendance rates were significantly lower in rural than in urban schools, but this is not borne out by the North Canterbury Education Board's annual report for 1880. Average attendance was 74% of the number enrolled in the five Christchurch schools with more than 500 pupils. The attendance rate at the 45 North Canterbury schools with 50 or fewer on the roll was 76%.<sup>28</sup> By 1908, there were nine North Canterbury schools with 500 or more pupils and an aggregate attendance rate of 87%; the corresponding figure for the 161 schools with 50 or fewer in 1908 was 85%.<sup>29</sup> While the difference between large and small schools in 1908 is in the expected direction, one cannot read much into it.

Paul Husbands's study of urban poverty in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Freeman's Bay describes the plight of women alone with children and notes the ways in which older children in towns and cities could bring in a little cash by delivering parcels, selling papers and flowers and collecting bottles, sacks and other scrap materials for sale.<sup>30</sup> Wage labour by parents brought other demands for older children's unpaid assistance — to mind infants or to care for a sick child while a parent was at work; and urban as well as rural children were kept from school to help with housework.

Folklore has it that girls were often absent on washday Mondays, but no one has tested this claim by analysing a good sample of school attendance

registers. The difference between North Canterbury boys' attendance rate (73.6%) and girls' (71.3%) in 1880 is in the expected direction but small.<sup>31</sup> The more significant difference is in the numbers enrolled. When enforcement was left to school committees, more girls than boys had short school lives or none at all. In 1882, for example, the Hawke's Bay inspector noted that there were 14% fewer girls than boys on the school rolls and he estimated that 300 girls of school age were kept at home in that district.<sup>32</sup> There were still fewer girls at school in the early twentieth century than population figures would lead one to expect. In 1911, for example, there were 97 New Zealand girls of school age for every 100 boys but only 91 girls for every 100 boys enrolled at public schools.<sup>33</sup> Attendance was not compulsory until age seven and parents may have kept more 5 and 6-year-old girls than boys at home.

Girls tended to make slightly better progress in school than boys. National examination statistics did not distinguish boys from girls, but individual inspectors' reports sometimes included the results of standard pass examinations by gender and these tables generally show girls performing slightly better than boys. In 1911, there were 94 girls aged 10 for every 100 boys of that age in state primary schools; at age 12 the ratio was 89:100 and at age 14 it was 82:100.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that girls were also more likely than boys to leave school immediately upon reaching the standard of exemption (by then Standard 6) or the legal leaving age (raised to 14 in 1901). In 1909 George Hogben (Inspector-General 1899–1915) concluded: 'Apparently there are a certain number of parents who think that it is sufficient for a girl to have little more than half the amount of schooling a boy receives.'<sup>35</sup>

School attendance could also be seriously affected by illness. 'The past year', said the South Canterbury inspector of 1893, 'will long be memorable for its measles, mumps and mud'.<sup>36</sup> It was a colony-wide epidemic which Pamela Wood has estimated affected nearly 5000 of Hawke's Bay's 6400 pupils.<sup>37</sup> Crowded schools (the Department deemed 10 square feet per child sufficient), primitive lavatories and contaminated water all helped spread infectious diseases. An inspector of schools put it pungently when he wrote: 'It is a mockery to teach the laws of health while in practice we infringe all of them.'<sup>38</sup> Attendance rates fell further when parents kept well children at home to avoid infection. The headmaster at Otaki noted in 1891 that reports of a skin complaint had lowered attendance, and in 1894 he wrote in his logbook: 'Attendance very bad all week which can be accounted for by the ignorant idea that typhoid fever is infectious.'<sup>39</sup>

Some committees put their faith in fumigation: it was easier to burn sulphur than to scrub a school or to use carbolic sprays as medical officers recommended. The standard practice, however, was simply to close a school until an epidemic had run its course, and some teachers acted early to protect their incomes. The 1901 commission on teachers' salaries was told that a head teacher who soldiered on during an epidemic of diphtheria had his salary — which was tied to average attendance — reduced by £30, while another principal had suffered no loss because 'he simply locked his school up and had a three months spell'.<sup>40</sup> Overall, children in education board schools were more likely to die of misadventure than of disease, but the risks of infection

were real: in 1880 the Rev. James Stack reported an epidemic fever at Wairewa Native School which had killed several pupils and put the school's future in doubt.<sup>41</sup>

Attendance rates increased throughout the nineteenth century, notwithstanding the economic depression of the 1880s, but increases in the first decade after the Education Act cannot be attributed to any general enforcement of the compulsory clauses. When the Auckland Education Board surveyed school committees in 1882 only 27 of the 157 who replied had implemented the compulsory clauses, and only four had actually obtained convictions.<sup>42</sup> Some committees, it seems, hoped that simply announcing that education was now compulsory would have the desired effect.

The 1877 requirement that pupils attend 'at least half the time the school is open' was unclear, and in 1885 the Otago Education Board noted that some magistrates declined to convict truants' parents during the first half of the school year on the grounds that pupils could comply with the Education Act by attending regularly during the second half.<sup>43</sup> The Act was amended in 1885 to require attendance on at least 30 days each quarter, but this change made no obvious difference to attendance rates. Subsequent legislation, the School Attendance Act 1894, required some school attendance every week, but not every weekday. Children were to go to school 'at least six times in any week in the course of which the school is open nine times'.<sup>44</sup> The 1894 Act also removed the local option, put the onus on parents of showing that a child was either attending school or exempt, and empowered truant officers to take proceedings on a committee's behalf.

Late nineteenth-century education boards' reports record truant officers appointed under a variety of terms and conditions. Otago's first truant officer was also the SPCA inspector; a Southland man, appointed in 1895, did double duty as truant officer and drill instructor. Some smaller boards looked to the police, and in 1888 the Westland Board appointed the Kumara and Hokitika constables as truant officers, one at £10 per annum and the other on a scale of payment by results.<sup>45</sup> In 1891, all police constables were instructed to 'cautiously ascertain' the names of children who should be at school, but in 1896 the Minister of Justice ruled against constables accepting paid appointments as truant officers because they already held so many other offices such as bailiff, poundkeeper or factory inspector.

The first truant officers had to deal with some truculent parents. John Blank of North Canterbury reported that he had been hooted by children at their parents' urging and on one occasion 'violently assaulted from behind by a vixen armed with a poker'.<sup>46</sup> Blank also made some dramatic captures. In 1900 he flushed out some persistent truants who were sleeping rough in Hagley Park, chased one on his bicycle until he collapsed, put the winded boy on the bicycle and wheeled him to the police station.<sup>47</sup>

The 1894 amendments to the school attendance laws brought a sharp increase in prosecutions from 160 in 1893 to 1283 in 1898. Raising the leaving age to 14 in 1901 brought a peak of 2160 prosecutions in 1903, but by 1914 the number of cases had fallen to a little over 200 a year.<sup>48</sup> Prosecution was, however, a last resort. In his first two years, Blank sent out more than 3000

notices, made hundreds of home visits and brought 277 prosecutions, 93% of which resulted in convictions.<sup>49</sup>

Some parents brought to court pleaded such poverty that their children lacked footwear or suitable clothing in which to go to school. In 1893, for instance, a Kaiapoi man, charged with failing to send six of his 19 children to school, said that they had no shoes and their clothes were in rags. This was confirmed by a constable, who added that the children were so dirty that he doubted any school would take them. H.W. Bishop, SM, excused the father costs in view of his poverty and appealed to the public for clothes. A few days later Belfast School pupils handed over a sack of clothing they had collected.<sup>50</sup> Newspaper reports make it clear that the Kaiapoi family's case was not an isolated one. The effects on children joining a class after such publicity can only be imagined.

In rural areas, better roads and bridges brought more children more regularly to school, and so did early forms of subsidized school transport. In 1885, the government provided free rail tickets to children under 15 who were not within reach of a school.<sup>51</sup> By 1901, the Department of Education was paying New Zealand Railways more than £3000 a year for rail passes.<sup>52</sup> Some boards experimented with horse-drawn conveyances in the 1890s, and in 1904 the Department offered travel allowances to parents when children under 11 had to travel three miles and older children had to travel four. The allowance (initially fourpence a day) could not be claimed for ponies or bicycles. When first introduced it only applied when a small school had been closed but, by 1911, the Department was spending more than £4000 a year to subsidize wagons, gigs and the occasional ferry.<sup>53</sup> Some pupils made lengthy journeys with an older child at the reins. A group of children near Waiiau, for example, drove 14 miles to school in a spring trap, crossing a river on the way.<sup>54</sup> Such travel could be hazardous. In 1904, three girls in Hawke's Bay were thrown from a trap when their horse bolted at the sound of a motorcar and a 7-year-old was killed.<sup>55</sup> The Department also introduced allowances of 2s.6d. a week for children who had to board to attend a public school and in 1911 it paid out £354, enough for about 70 children for a school year of 40 weeks.<sup>56</sup>

Teachers and education authorities also offered rewards for regular attendance. Education board certificates were handsome, coloured documents with the pupils' names carefully inscribed, and some schools offered other inducements. In 1906 Dannevirke School gave cash prizes of 7s.6d. for a perfect attendance record and the Patutahi committee awarded silver medals.<sup>57</sup> Other schools procured trophies to be held, pro tem, by the classroom with the best record. In 1901 the principal of Addington School noted that competition for an attendance banner had raised attendance rates considerably.<sup>58</sup> Some Dunedin schools sent out runners to absentees' houses to help boost attendance rates.<sup>59</sup>

The School Attendance Act 1901 not only raised the leaving age to 14 but tightened the weekly requirement. Children had to attend four times a week if the school were open six times, six out of eight times and eight out of ten times. Children under 10 were still exempt if they lived more than two miles from a school, but for those over 10 it was three miles. This Act brought another



temporary rise in prosecutions, but there was no corresponding increase when, in 1910, children were finally required to attend every time the school was open and the exemption for distance disappeared.

In the nineteenth century, it was assumed that mentally or physically handicapped children were, in the words of the Act, exempt from school attendance 'by reason of . . . permanent infirmity, or other unavoidable cause'. In the early twentieth century, children with a variety of impairments were successively brought under the compulsory clauses. The Department of Education had established a residential school for the deaf at Sumner in 1880, and a small number of blind New Zealand children were sent to special schools in Sydney or Melbourne at government expense until the Jubilee Institute for the Blind was established in Parnell in 1891; but some parents did not want to be parted from their children for long periods. The 1901 School Attendance Act, however, required them to provide 'efficient and suitable education for such child', if not privately then by sending them to Christchurch or Auckland, and the Act provided for the apportionment of the costs of residential schooling. Parents could be directed to pay up to 10s. a week but the state bore the full costs when parents could demonstrate their inability to make any contribution.

In 1907, epileptic and 'defective' children were also included. A defective child was carefully defined as 'not being idiot or imbecile and not merely backward', unable to benefit from a regular school but 'not incapable by reason of such defect of receiving benefit from instruction in a special school or class'.<sup>60</sup> As the only facility for such children before the Great War was an isolated school for boys in the Waitaki Valley, established in 1908, this requirement was, indeed, more a hopeful gesture than a practical possibility.

The twentieth century also saw Maori brought under compulsion. Under the Native schools Act 1867, Maori communities had to petition for a school, to provide a suitable site and meet a significant proportion of the costs. The financial requirements were relaxed in 1871 and there were 57 Native schools in 1879 when the Department of Education assumed control from the Native Department.<sup>61</sup> With sizeable areas of the North Island closed to the Department — it was 1886 before the first Native school was established in the King Country<sup>62</sup> — it is understandable that Maori children were not legally required to go to school until 1894 and then only if there was a Native school nearby.<sup>63</sup> The 1901 Act provided for the Minister to make regulations to bring Maori under the same requirements as Pakeha and the necessary regulations were gazetted in 1903.

Inspectors' reports for 1890 illustrate the range of social and economic influences on attendance at Native schools. Attendance at Otatau and Huria had fallen because the price of kauri gum had risen. Some parents at Oheawai had withdrawn their children because the teacher would not expel a Pakeha boy who had hunted their pigs. Mangakahia had been affected by 'frequent native meetings' and Tapapa by 'Kingism', while a number of Tokomaru children had gone grass-seeding.<sup>64</sup> In the early twentieth century, attendance at schools in the Urewera region fell when the prophet Rua Kenana spoke against them.<sup>65</sup>

Such disruptions meant lower attendance rates at Native than at education board schools. In 1899, attendance at Native schools as a percentage of those

on the register was 75% compared with 81% in public primary schools.<sup>66</sup> The more significant difference, however, was between Maori and European enrolments as percentages of the relevant age groups. Table 3 is based on the numbers of Maori and Pakeha on the register of any New Zealand school — state or private, primary or secondary — at the end of a school year and on the census conducted early in a following year.<sup>67</sup> It not only records lower enrolment rates overall for Maori than for Pakeha but more marked gender differences.

Histories of Maori education have focused on Native schools but by 1911 about half of all Maori pupils were in education board schools — although there were protests in some places when the first Maori were enrolled in the nineteenth century. When Maori were admitted to the board school in Rotorua in the 1880s, for example, some parents, including an MHR, withdrew their children.<sup>68</sup>

**Table 3:** Enrolments (all schools)

	Maori		Pakeha	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1885	1320	1028	60,731	58,149
1900	2610	1929	76,952	74,352
1910	5142	4095	93,067	87,755

Enrolments as percentage of population aged 5–15

	Maori		Pakeha	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1885	32.6	30.4	79.3	77.4
1900	51.4	43.3	89.1	87.9
1910	76.4	66.7	92.8	90.3

Home schooling declined as the number of schools grew, but it remained the preferred option for some wealthy parents and the only option for the most isolated families. The 1871 census report noted that the number of children educated at home was unknown, but ‘the existence, extent and value of HOME EDUCATION in New Zealand should never be lost sight of or treated as unimportant in any comprehensive estimate of the means in operation for the intellectual and moral training of the youth of the colony’.<sup>69</sup> The 1874 census, the first to record them, reported that 8368 children were educated at home — equivalent to 12% of children aged 5 to 15. That figure fell to 6% in 1881 and to 3% in 1906. As the Department of Education did not record the numbers of children who had been formally exempt from attendance, one cannot estimate how many home-schooled children would have otherwise been obliged to go to school. Some of those ‘educated at home’ might well have been more correctly entered as ‘relative assisting unpaid’.

‘Home tuition’, the Department thought, was often ‘of a very indifferent character’ unless parents had hired a tutor or governess, and census figures indicate that only a small number of parents hired help.<sup>70</sup> Eighteen men and 476

women described themselves as tutors or governesses at the 1881 census: one for every 15 children taught at home.<sup>71</sup> Surviving accounts of home schooling in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often describe a mixture of parental effort and school attendance. Agnes Bryant's parents decided she was too small to walk to school so her father bought a slate and some primers, sat her on his knee in the evening and taught her to read, spell, write and count; when she turned 8 and went to school she was placed in Standard 1.<sup>72</sup> Mervyn Stewart's mother taught him in the mornings until he was nearly 10 and could ride seven miles a day to school. When he was 11, he boarded with grandparents who lived near a state school. After a subsequent period at a church boarding school in Auckland, he returned home and his parents hired a tutor for him.<sup>73</sup>

It was easier for middle-class than working-class parents to persuade a school committee to grant a certificate of exemption, and truant officers sometimes doubted parents' capacities as teachers. In 1898, a rag and bottle merchant told a Christchurch magistrate that he could teach his children himself, but his claimed qualifications melted away under Mr Blank's stern cross-examination.<sup>74</sup>

By the early twentieth century, with schools in hundreds of small settlements, the numbers of home-schooled children had dwindled but not just to the offspring of the wealthy. Stevan Eldred-Grigg concluded that most of the Canterbury girls receiving 'home instruction' at the time of the 1911 census were 'probably the daughters of large landowners', but that seems unlikely given the number of governesses in the colony.<sup>75</sup> The 1911 figures also included a child who was singled out in a newspaper article in 1912. Why, the *Lyttelton Times* asked, had no one done anything about the little girl 'who sits the livelong day beside a blind man in Cathedral Square holding the cash box'?'<sup>76</sup> The blind man responded to the editor, explaining that his 8-year-old daughter had a certificate of exemption. He had cared for her since infancy; they were only in the Square for an hour or so at a time; he had no state assistance; he depended on her to lead him about; and it would be cruel to part them.<sup>77</sup>

The UNESCO study concluded that the battle for compulsory attendance was won by 1914, but 1921 looks to be more significant. That year, the Department of Education finalized plans for a Correspondence School for the last unschooled children, and although the 1921 census contained a question on education, the familiar tables showing pupils as a percentage of the relevant age-group were deemed to be of such little interest that they were not printed. An amending Act in 1921 also brought private schools under full state surveillance by requiring them all to be registered.

Primary schooling for both Maori and Pakeha was well-nigh universal by the 1920s. It had also been homogenized. John Mulgan, who was born in 1911, later wrote: 'Everyone in New Zealand went to the same school and learned the same things, and this gave us a common basis for any conversation we cared to have.'<sup>78</sup> That was not strictly true, but it was an understandable exaggeration. The Department of Education's 1880 first Native schools syllabus had only four standards and fewer subjects than were taught in education board schools, but Standards 5 and 6 as prescribed for public schools were added to the Native school curriculum in the 1890s. By the 1920s the official syllabuses for the

two sorts of school were the same, although Native schools still had some distinctive features such as daily 'toothbrush drill' and, after 1931, elements of Maori culture such as weaving or carving. Private primary schools were also obliged to follow the state syllabus closely enough for their pupils to be, in the words of the Education Act 1914, 'under instruction as regular and efficient as in a registered school'. (Catholic primary schools had, in fact, adopted the public school curriculum in the 1890s so that their pupils could obtain the standard pass certificates required for an increasing number of jobs.)

George Hogben was particularly concerned at truancy in cities and towns. Recapitulationist psychology suggested that truants were arrested at the nomadic stage of social development. Such children, Hogben warned, would, if neglected, 'swell our industrial schools and reformatories and, at a later age, our prisons, refuges and lunatic asylums'.<sup>79</sup> Rural 'truants' were at least usually engaged in productive work, for there was still plenty of child labour fitted around the school day and the school year in the 1920s and a certain amount of house or farm work could be reckoned character-forming. 'Milking children' who fell asleep at their desks, however, were a cause for official concern and parliamentary comment. To work 'children at a serviceable age' early and late, to leave them no time for play, and to deny them effective schooling was, by definition, to rob them of their childhood.

Improvements in school attendance owed more to parental choices than the police power of the state. School attendance requirements and exemptions from them were pragmatic responses to colonial circumstances. The law as it was progressively stiffened up was only fully deployed to coerce the reluctant minority. Enrolment and attendance rates improved with the multiplication of small schools, better roads, more bridges and an increasing demand for educational credentials for both government and private employment. These developments and the introduction of free secondary schooling in the early twentieth century increased children's options and shaped their parents' aspirations for them. The history of the long road to universal schooling is not so much the essence of innumerable biographies as of innumerable family histories.

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## NOTES

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