

The Truant as an Interminably Malleable Subject: Historical Reflections on a Contemporary ‘Crisis’

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Prior to 1877, patterns of school attendance in New Zealand were flexible and this was accepted as normal. By the end of the nineteenth century, the terms and conditions of compulsory schooling produced the idea of childhood as lacking by converting different patterns of school attendance into an understanding of an inferior childhood. This article explores how nonconforming children were categorised in this way by examining the range of meanings that were put forth as true about children’s upbringing, and which justified strategies for managing school attendance. The category of truancy appears as a firmly fixed and accepted social problem. However its development was continually shaped and reshaped by an administrative bureaucracy that increasingly regulated, and therefore constituted, how we relate to the child both in and out-of-school.

Introduction

Universal provision of education is commonly seen as one of ‘the fruits of modernity’. In its assumed potential to transcend the ascriptive allocation of social roles “education has been a keystone of attempts to extend the benefits of progress to whole populations, indeed to the whole of humanity. It has come to stand for the possibility of individual and collective improvement, individual and collective emancipation” (Dale, 1992: 203). Viewed this way, it is not surprising that recent headlines and commentary should proclaim that the New Zealand government has planned to double the funding “to tackle truancy”, to “introduce electronic attendance registers” and to encourage schools “to implement early notification systems, which automatically send text messages to parents when students are absent without explanation” (*New Zealand Herald*, 2 March, 2010). In an area noted as having “the highest rate of truant pupils in the country”, it is stated that currently “groups such as Strengthening Families, Special Education, Truancy Services and Police Youth Aid were all working with the problem in their own ‘cells’” (*The Gisborne Herald*, 3 March, 2010).

The problem of truancy is portrayed unproblematically as an issue of protecting and correcting vulnerable, troublesome children from unstable families to enable them to develop ‘normally’ and to take up the rights and duties bestowed through universal education. Failure to attend school provides a rationale for governing that allows for the diagnosis and treatment of children who do not consume the ‘fruits of modernity’. This rationale is rarely questioned. I argue that these contemporary meanings are part of ongoing historical attempts to reform the conditions of monitoring school attendance in the belief that it is in the best interests of both the child/student, and society as a whole.

It has been argued that “many imposed reform plans actually reinforce the very system that reformers want to change by ignoring the history of public education” (Bower, 2006: 61). This article revisits some historical moments in the development of mass compulsory schooling in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century to show that the “deep structure” (Tye, 2000: 3) of schooling remains intact in 2010. It argues that the deep structure of education in New Zealand is one characterised by complexity and permanent tension and that the form of

schooling that emerged in late nineteenth century New Zealand was characterised as much by ambiguity and ambivalence as by any clearly articulated order on the part of the state. This understanding significantly recasts the framing of the modern state away from *la raison d'état*, to what Schafer refers to as *l'imaginaire d'état*, that is, the establishment of the identity and moral nature of the state (Schafer, 1997).

The necessity for an historical perspective

Examining the historical roots of our current knowledge about children's 'true', 'normal' and 'natural' development highlights some of the deep truths about schooling. These are not self-evident truths. In the late nineteenth century, a new moral understanding of the role of society in fashioning the individual, particularly through the provision of social rights, was emerging in New Zealand and elsewhere. Through compulsory schooling, the child became the focus of a new kind of state intervention by the operation of power *through* knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Children became the objects of moral reflection, of scientific knowledge and of political analysis, each of which produced a number of truths about the child in general and the truant in particular. Issues such as reducing crime, protecting children, providing opportunity, raising the citizen and increasing productivity informed discursive strategies that placed the child within a range of disciplinary practices and techniques within the educational space (Jacka, 2003).

The forms of social conflict present within late nineteenth century New Zealand were not resolved or united with the advent of compulsory schooling in the best interests of the child, for the child itself was positioned in a range of contradictory discourses. As Stephenson (2000) demonstrates, educational development hinged on assumptions about the child that were institutionally present before schooling was made compulsory in 1877. The problem of the truant was less to do with an increasing number of young people out-of-school than it was with how to govern the population within the context of liberal democracy. When national education was being debated in 1877, the problem child was presented in a number of ways which justified measures to enforce compulsion. Compulsion was not simply a straightforward, benign or enlightened effort on the part of the state. Problem children not in school were simultaneously dangerous to social order, victims of parental neglect, but potentially productive and conforming citizens-in-the-making who could be redeemed. The tension between 'blaming' and 'redeeming' reflected emerging political discourses that proliferated into a welfare network, producing meanings that differentiated the normal (developing, liberated and deserving) child from the abnormal (stunted, oppressed and undeserving) child. Projects of reform administered to a new kind of civic life based on delineation into spheres of public and private. Children's problems entered discourse in relation to both public and private meanings.

This was possible because broad strategies of caring for the child and discourses about parental responsibility for education pre-existed compulsory schooling. For example, the Destitute Persons Ordinance of 1846 had demanded that fathers of illegitimate Māori children provide regular maintenance and education of the child in the English language and in Christianity. Some 21 years later, reflecting the situations facing many settlers at the time and the ways these were interpreted at the official level, the Neglected and Criminal Children Act of 1867 was passed. Life in colonial New Zealand brought its own particular physical and social tensions and challenges, not only for the adult population, but also for children. Parental illness, death, or desertion left many children vulnerable, often dependent on community or charitable support, or exposed to morally threatening situations (Stephenson, 2008). This Act sought to remove children from situations that were considered adverse to

a sound moral upbringing in order to expose them to appropriate moral training. According to this legislation, it was the duty of the state to look after the interests of helpless and dependent child and to monitor and correct their behaviour if and when their parents did not. These early state interventions established both family norms and responsibilities that were to become further embedded in subsequent education and welfare legislation, and a discourse of state responsibility as a principle that was not inconsistent with the principle of individual freedom. Indeed, as an early attempt to institute national education was being discussed in parliament, the role of the state as the parent-substitute was based on a belief of protecting the individual rights of the child:

From the moment the child enters life it appears to me to have rights of its own, and as long as it is helpless it is the duty of the state, if necessary, to see that it is cared for, and has that done for it which it is not able to do for itself (*New Zealand Parliamentary Debates [NZPD]*, 1870, Vol. 9: 48).

The child as an object of moral reflection

Compulsory schooling produced an unquestioned truth about the relationship between children, state and society. If education were a matter of provision and protection of the child's rights, problems in administering a state system of schooling indicated problems in the social body, particularly within problem families. Parents who failed "to give any attention whatever to the education of their children" were guilty of "ignorance and pure neglect" (*NZPD*, 1901, Vol. 117: 123). Framed through a discourse of parental neglect, it was felt that without the proper guidance, the neglected child was both vulnerable to and a potential source of corruption. This was expressed in the words of the Master of the Caversham Industrial School in his contention that the founding purpose of the institution had been "to remove from society and from their parents", children from a "class of people many of whom were leading an irregular dissipated life [who] were likely to become pests to society" (*Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives [AJHR]*, 1881, E-6A: 19). Schools became sites of civic redemption and social restitution through 'appropriate' training and correcting. Parents who were seen to neglect their social duty to send their children to school would be suitably punished whilst the danger implicit in the negligent parent would be transcended through school attendance monitoring practices that could measure 'proper' moral standards within the home and family.

The discourse of the negligent parent was increasingly framed around the state's power to act 'in loco parentis'. This was part of the administrative framework that produced the family as metaphor for correct social relations and was exemplified in the practice of "[b]oard[ing]-out to carefully chosen foster-parents", those orphaned or destitute children "without any other abnormal characteristics" as being "the most natural" way of addressing their needs (*AJHR*, 1900, E-1, p. xviii). Just as ignorant and neglectful parents were seen to be a source of the child's corruption those who could provide what was seen to be the ideal home environment could be a source of salvation through their employment of appropriate child-rearing practices (Stephenson, 2000).

Compulsory schooling further converted what were perceived as inappropriate patterns of child-rearing into a problem requiring state management, by conflating attendance problems and issues relating to child labour, and posing them in terms of the danger presented for the universally developing child and for the educated society. If the family metaphor assumed that going to school was in the best interests of the child, it was not necessarily in the best interests of the working-class family economy. The two separate discourses of children's and parents' rights set up tensions with traditional patterns of child labour, a necessity in the

lives of working-class households. The economic imperatives of the working class family were thus unproblematically designated a problem of parental neglect and exploitation in the 1894 debates to tighten the compulsory clauses and to introduce new factory legislation. These views were expressed by Premier Seddon.

It is most desirable, if we are to be an intelligent community, and if we are to do justice to the colonial education system, that we should prevent boys from being sent to work until they have received education up to the fourth standard. This will force those parents whom unfortunately we have amongst us, who will not do what is just to their offspring (*NZPD*, 1894, Vol. 83: 305).

Discourses of the neglectful (and exploiting) parent intersected with patriarchal discourses that took for granted the household structure with the male-as-breadwinner at the head of the nuclear family (Davey, 1987: 10). This model of family relations required a construction of the labour market which excluded women and children and relocated them to their 'proper' place, at home and at school, respectively (Davey, 1987; Paterson, 1989; Davey & Miller, 1990). The attempt to impose such a framework in the New Zealand context presented considerable contradictions for families in general and for women in particular. As a frontier society New Zealand had presented an environment which was conducive to women enhancing their independent status, but it was not isolated from the impact of the 'crisis in patriarchy' which had developed throughout nineteenth century Europe as children moved out of the home and into society and the economy (Davey, 1987; Davey & Miller, 1990). One way in which this came to be expressed in New Zealand was in the labour movement's resistance to the employment of women and children as a threat to men's labour (Graham, 1986). This supported, and was supported by, the thread of debates over regulating school attendance that hinged on the idea of obedience and discipline to the patriarchal social order. Within this discursive context, compulsion marked a particular moral critique of an indisposition by many to the effects of the transition to an industrial economy, namely, the increasing number of women and young children entering the work force and becoming wage-earners (Graham, 1986; Davey, 1987) and informed another moral justification for moving children from the work-force and into schools. The increasing number of independent households was seen to mean less parental control, reducing social ills to the disruption of the natural order of things. This recast the problem from getting more children into schools to encouraging a particular pattern of regular school attendance as a symbol of normal or correct family relations—with children firmly under disciplinary authority.

Despite the continual tightening of minimum attendance requirements, and evidence that many parents were sending their children to school, Education Boards pressed for legislative reform to enable more effective enforcement of compulsory procedures. In part, this was due to their reliance on capitation grants for funding (McGeorge, 1993), and in part to the administrative problem schools faced with children who were at a 'loose end' by the minimum age set by employment legislation. The mismatch between school leaving age and legislation to regulate child employment in 1894 saw a situation where children under the age of 14 were restricted from employment, while school attendance was compulsory only until 13 years. Lobbying for the raising of the school leaving age was seen to serve two purposes—to keep those children off the streets, as well as to bring more funding into schools. This would answer the concern that children too old for school and too young for employment were in danger of wandering the streets in idleness (McKenzie, 1982).

The early discursive linking of crime and ignorance was most noticeably manifested in consigning responsibility for industrial schools with the Justice Department prior to universalising education in New Zealand, and in the role of Charles Bowen, Minister of Justice, in framing the 1877 national legislation (Stephenson, 2000). Understandings of the truant as criminal offender were introduced into parliamentary debate when discussion of the Massachusetts model of enforced compulsion disclosed the practice of trial and sentencing to a reformatory of those cases where the authorities had “fail[ed] to check the habit of truancy” (*NZPD*, 1870, Vol. 9: 49). It was argued that “all violent crimes which society sets its face against and undertakes to prevent, are much more frequently associated with ignorance than with knowledge, that, in fact, vice loves to nestle with ignorance” (*NZPD*, 1870, Vol. 9: 47). The child-out-of-school was the young criminal offender in the first stage of criminal behaviour, his/her criminality being a function of unsupervised wandering—the truant, the nomad, the vagrant.

Parental criminal neglect, because of its link to future child criminality, was used to justify more stringent compulsory legislation in 1894. According to parliamentarian R. Meredith, the fact that there was a large number of children in the Industrial Schools, “proved at once to his mind that the education of those children had been criminally neglected, and that their parents were greatly to blame” (*NZPD*, 1894, Vol. 85: 265). Similarly, when the first moves to introduce truant officers in New Zealand were put into place they were referred to as default officers, with French derivative connotations of ‘failure’. Parents who allowed their children to absent themselves from school became criminally negligent whilst the children themselves became juvenile delinquents and potential habitual offenders. Both parental irresponsibility and truancy as criminal practice were targeted by disciplinary mechanisms.

In the great majority of cases young criminals begin by becoming accustomed to a nomadic life, and the greatest blow to juvenile delinquency would be dealt by stopping this at the outset. Too much emphasis cannot be laid on the necessity for preventing children from acquiring the nomadic habit. Day industrial schools (or truant schools) would afford a great means of stopping incipient nomadism, without lessening the responsibility of parents (*AJHR*, 1900, E-1: xix).

In debating the 1901 legislation, Meredith introduced a further dimension to his 1894 argument.

I am of the opinion that any parent neglecting to see that his child gets the benefit of free education is committing a serious offence against the State, and I think it would be wrong to be lenient out of respect to the feelings of such parents (*NZPD*, 1901, Vol. 117: 124).

Truant Schools would function both to correct problem behaviour and to segregate problem children from innocent regularly-attending students. Failure of parents to ensure that their children, already placed in Truant Schools, were in regular attendance could result in their committal to an Industrial Training School.

Thus, the meaning of the truant as an object of moral reflection was not a unified set of meanings. Rather, it was produced through a series of tensions relating to the reconstruction of the household, and discourses of the neglectful parent and the dangerous and endangered child. Parents were contradictorily positioned as both the cause and solution to the problem. The state was both saviour of the individual truant, as well as saving society from the apparent ‘scourge’ of truancy.

The truant as an object of scientific inquiry

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, children became the objects of scientific inquiry and the source of a number of 'truths' about the child and the idea of childhood. In the education arena moral and ethical concerns were transformed into universal truths about rational conduct through a growing educational and psychological expertise which compulsory school legislation helped to shape and develop (Jacka, 2003, Carlen, Gleeson & Wardaugh, 1992). The child was increasingly divided up for classification and measurement according to the layer at which they interacted with social administration.

Scientific knowledge was particularly influential in the promotion of discourses of redemption which sought to eradicate social problems that posed a threat to the health of the individual or of society. Because problems of childhood were conceptualised in a number of ways, such 'truths' located the child in contradictory ways and subjected them to control through competing interpretations. The truant became different from the absconder, who was different from the feeble-minded child, each of which required a different political intervention—truant officers/schools, borstals and mental hospitals, for example. The identification of differences such as those between the regular and the irregular attender did more than just create the subjectivity of, for example, the truant and the normal (regularly attending) child, but worked simultaneously to normalise certain ways in which we make meaning of children and marginalise others (Jacka, 2003).

The development of modern social policies was closely related to the bureaucratisation of the state, to developments in social knowledges and to the increasing use of experts (Stephenson 2008). Compulsory school attendance monitoring practices were a mechanism for gathering information about the child, for measuring moral standards within the home and family and for normalising state responses to problems of non-conformity as a mechanism of protecting the child and society. Domains of power/knowledge about the child and its proper place produced the truant as a real category, justifying interventions on the basis of scientifically observable characteristics that should be present in all children. This acted as a supposedly neutral and scientific assessment of the situation as defined and supported by experts and the developing social knowledges (Rueschemeyer & Skocpol, 1996).

School attendance came to be one of several observable characteristics that showed children developing as they 'should'. Monitoring school attendance thus gave legitimacy to a set of practical interventions that produced an assumption about the universal development of the child that was gaining favour in this historical period. Attendance registers enabled the continual management of students' practical behaviour towards authority relations. The arguments around which the 1904 School Attendance Act was developed had much to do with legitimating these recording procedures that had been put in place as proof of the child's (non-)attendance. Speaking against the necessity for teachers to attend court hearings to support claims of truancy, for example, Richard Seddon argued that if the school roll were provided it "ought to be admitted as sufficient evidence of irregular attendance" (*NZPD*, 1904, Vol. 128: 634).

Mapping the attendance habits of children, identifying differences between the attender and the non-attender, and judging conduct in accordance with normal expectations provided the educational domain with the knowledge and influence to regulate the child along several borders. According to Bruce Curtis (1985: 376), this created a certain "tactical space", a certain vagueness that provided "room to manoeuvre" for educational authorities in the construction of the developing child that a developing educational state sought to govern. The category of

truant enabled the child to be surrounded with experts who could watch out for and interpret signs of its development. Educational expertise became a form of vigilant caring, watching for signs that guidance in the home was failing. The truant officer represented this watchfulness, whose role it was to warn parents and to have the child returned to school (Jacka, 2003).

At another level, compulsory school attendance enabled standards of development, well-being and social behaviour for all children to be imposed and measured, judgements to be made, and transgressions legitimately corrected for the good of all children. It provided a mechanism for gathering information about the child through an elaborate administrative structure that was not simply educational. A multi-faceted bureaucracy was set up to regulate and distribute society according to the production of knowledge or expertise, drawn together to promote a kind of social insurance against sickness, poverty, crime and other social problems (Stephenson 2000). This intersected with the emergence of a more disciplinary regime, that of eugenics. The discursive production of 'deviant' populations which had been firmly established through nineteenth century educational and institutional practices provided a sound foundation on which eugenics could be subsequently accommodated and fostered, within a specific set of conditions, as a new explanatory paradigm for human behaviour and condition. As Stephenson (2000: 283) notes, "eugenics joined the many competing religious, scientific, and political discourses" and provided the discursive tools for defining new 'abnormal' subjects as a means of managing the moral, physical and intellectual health of the population.

This was manifested in increasingly sophisticated categorisation procedures, specifically case studies and analyses of 'pedigrees', in stronger reliance on expert knowledge and on different expert opinion, in more rigid segregation on the basis of diagnosis, age and sex, and in the adoption of medical forms of treatment (Stephenson 2000: 279).

It was within this context that the Inspector-General of Schools, George Hogben, in reviewing Industrial School legislation, identified truancy as characteristic of the first of the stages through which juvenile delinquency progressed. At the same time, he made specific references to the 'causes' of juvenile crime in modern society, linking such factors as poverty, poor hygiene, urban dwelling, and parental issues.

(a) the stress and struggle of life; (b) bad hygienic surroundings and consequently inferior physique; (c) the temptations that result from overcrowding and from greater facilities for committing petty thefts with impunity that exist in the towns compared with the country; (d) inherited low physical and moral nature; (e) weakness and want of control on the part of parents; (f) the neglect and bad example of parents (*AJHR*, 1900, E-3: 2).

The truant was thus defined by the top educational official, as of a latent or developing criminal nature, a definition which went hand-in-hand with the more explicitly defined spaces of correction which came with the ensuing legislation. Ian Hunter (1994) suggests that in the late nineteenth century the human subject was seen to be able to perfect our lives according to specific practices—of bodily health and of moral comportment. People increasingly conducted themselves according to what they knew to be true about desire, life, the body, and nature. For the truant, documentation of attendance produced a body of knowledge by which children would come to know and accept their crime, just as others would come to know and judge them according to this truth (Foucault, 1982). This knowledge made them manageable in terms of the identification of individual characteristics that marked them as normal and compliant or abnormal and requiring treatment.

Objectifying the truant as an object of universal, scientific knowledge made children and their families governable in new ways. That is, if children ‘naturally’ belonged in schools, and parents ‘naturally’ sent them there, then transgression of these boundaries was the fault of either the individual child or parent(s). Having already established the moral dangers of non-attendance, attention shifted to the social dangers and possible mechanisms for reducing them. New forms of state intervention were created, which worked through an administrative framework that positioned itself outside the state. This was the neutral mediating sphere of experts who managed risks that individuals both posed and were threatened by (Foucault, 1991).

The truant as an object of political analysis

Simultaneously seeking to uphold the rights of the child, the rights of parents and the rights of the population is an effect of what Foucault (1991) calls a *problematization* of governing in a liberal democracy. The language of rights, therefore, provided administrative powers of the educational bureaucracy with a contradictory agenda. On the one hand, they sought to affirm the political responsibility of the state, based on a requirement of justice; on the other hand their powers had to sit alongside civil responsibility, based on respect for freedom (Donzelot, 1988: 396). This contradictory set of meanings made the practical application of the compulsory clauses ambiguous.

Discourses of citizenship positioned the child as a developing citizen who, because of her/his ‘nature’, was not yet capable of taking up the position of the liberal subject. She/he was produced as a liminal democratic subject, both as an active, knowing, autonomous individual with rights, and as a passive, innocent dependant without rights. This liminal state imbued educational power with a certain vagueness, erecting a permeable boundary between the home and the school. For the child, who was firmly located as a product of her/his family environment, parents were in the best position to nurture citizenship and to bring forth the active, knowing autonomous individual. Where parents failed, however, schooling was seen to be especially crucial in the protection of individual rights. Children out-of-school were children doubly denied of their rights of attaining citizenship at the hands of negligent parents. Disciplinary practices were therefore based upon regulating the family’s function to correct those instances where the family’s ability to promote appropriate individual autonomy had failed. This meant that within the framework of individual rights parents had their own rights to protection and freedom but these were limited by the extent to which they conformed to particular family standards. Contradictions in respecting the individual and managing the population were woven into the administrative practices that came to regulate school attendance (Jacka, 2003).

Protecting children through schooling thus became associated with the need for state intervention in protecting the rights of the individual and those of a growing a democratic nation-state. Part of a healthy democracy was to monitor and regulate the nation’s youth and parental obligations by a system of state-provided compulsory schooling. Within the wider agenda of social order and conformity, this extended to the establishment of segregated institutions where targeted correction was deemed necessary. This reinforced the right of the state to govern children, and produced ways of acting within the social body as moral imperatives—an idea of liberal rule based upon a perceived interdependence between rational, private citizens and the public or civil sphere—working together for the good of each.

Practices to monitor and guide school attendance, and to punish non-compliance, were therefore an important part of forging a new relationship between the government and the

governed. Children were accorded with a new social status, that of developing citizens who could no longer be subject to the same social conditions that adults lived in. Through the compulsory legislation, families' private rights were reconstituted as a public duty, for which failure to comply could result in prosecution of parents, and the possible institutionalisation of their children. Parents' private rights were respected only to the extent that they fulfilled their public duty by sending their children to school. Children's rights were developed around creating the circumstances which would enable them to become the sort of citizen they *should* become. The category of the truant was one means of providing the child with rights through which it could be governed.

The tensions in according citizens with both individual rights and social duties enabled the child to be isolated from the parent, discursively split from its private location within the family, from adults and from each other. In this way the child became a subject in its own right—not simply as part of a family unit, or even as a member of its peer group. Within a rhetoric of protection, the child was seen to *need* the prescribed state intervention and thus became an object of state management. Through schools, certain beliefs about appropriate forms of conduct over and from children became translated into administrative practices that came to regulate the social bonds between people as a means of resolving social conflict. Attendance registers, school inspectors' reports and strategies to penalise parents were part of running a good democracy, of respecting rights and promoting freedom, while requiring certain responsibilities and duties to the state. At the same time, the tenuous nature of the child's citizenship rights was expressed in the fact that failure to comply with attendance legislation constituted grounds from which she/he could be graded a second class citizen whose citizenship rights were eroded through committal to a state institution. These disciplinary strategies and relations intersected to position the truant as a subject and object of state welfare. Children could be both victims of parental neglect and uncontrollable urchins. In either case, developing knowledge was produced through which the state could control the guardianship of all children via threats, fines and removal from families. It also became possible for the range of children's behaviour to be placed under the surveillance of experts who could mitigate the transgressions of parents and/or children against their new duty to the state (Jacka, 2003).

The slippage of meanings that attach to the child out-of-school, at once dangerous and needing to be controlled and at the same time endangered and needing protection, employed different tactics to manage non-attendance through identifying the deserving from the undeserving recipient of state provision of schooling. The provision of individual rights worked to constitute those who took them up (that is, who went to school) as deserving citizens, and those who did not as undeserving. School attendance, therefore, came to mark a distinction between certain kinds of citizens: those who acted for or against the interest of the population as a whole. Compulsory legislation gave rise to associated institutionalised practices, and the consolidation of physical and social environments which were designed to include and standardise. Conversely, in the case of those who failed to conform and therefore did not meet defined norms, disciplinary technologies worked to exclude and discriminate, in spaces and environments to accommodate and treat perceived abnormalities.

Whelan (1999: 51) contends state intervention in education was regulatory, and served "to protect the nation's investment in children". The potential of truanting children as financially contributing citizens-in-the-making was compromised. At an institutional level, truants were also constituted through a bureaucratic rationalisation of state resources that tied funding

to school attendance. When the regional Education Boards moved to tighten the compulsory regulations, this was not simply a response to the problem of truancy, but also a means of addressing wider political and economic problems. Increasing the powers of Truant Officers signified a strengthening of the burgeoning educational bureaucracy. It also facilitated the generation of revenue for the education sector. Because boards received funding in the form of capitation grants, that is, depending upon the number of children who attended school, monitoring school attendance was a means by which state funding was distributed (McGeorge, 1993). Thus it was important that schools could account for the bodies of young people who were registered as pupils, ensuring that they attended for the required proportion of time stated in the legislation.

Conclusion

Legislative thinking in nineteenth century New Zealand was predicated upon a discourse of rights, producing the child as an individual who had rights of his or her own, such as a right to schooling. These rights positioned the parent as the legal guardian of the innocent child, and the school as the moral guardian to protect children from negligent parenting. Through a discourse of neglectful parents, schooling recreated a social environment in which parents were responsible for the achievement of state goals. The meaning of the truant in this regard composed itself around discourses that took as their task the eradication of social ills such as idle youth and neglectful parenting. Monitoring school attendance became a means of regulating the conduct of parents who neglected the educational welfare of their children and hence the collective welfare of the people. School attendance, as a right and privilege provided by the state, became the norm through which children and parents were judged and deemed to conform (or not) to the interests of the population.

I have argued that the truant was made problematic in the context of administering compulsory schooling. Truancy as a form of social regulation was characterised as much by ambiguity and ambivalence as by any clearly articulated order on the part of the state. This understanding significantly recasts the framing of the modern state away from *la raison d'état* to what Schafer refers to as *l'imaginaire d'état*, that is, the establishment of the identity and moral nature of the state (Schafer 1997). In New Zealand, practices of managing school attendance were not overtly controlling but productive of a space wherein the meaning of truancy represented the desires of an emerging state form. Discursive constructions of the problem child positioned truants in ways that were not homogeneous. Truancy was constituted as a moral problem located in the individual, a political problem of governing in a liberal democracy, and a problem to be resolved through the application of scientific knowledge and expertise to both of these spheres.

This triumvirate of meaning regarding truancy continually shapes and reshapes the meaning of truancy. By the turn of the century, an expanding administrative structure had a range of opposing and contradictory meanings of the truant at its disposal. In 2010, a range of institutional features have solidified truancy as a permanent means of regulating the population. Non-attendance at school continues to be seen as a violation of a range of social norms, such as knowing how to properly parent children, how to properly run schools and how to properly cater to the rights of both children and society as a whole. Truancy is more than a problem of breaking moral and legal codes. It was, and is, a problem that is described in bodies of writing by sets of 'experts' who assert that it must be studied and eradicated (Jacka, 2003). The current assessment of the issue, as expressed recently in relation to one of the 'worst' areas in the country, is that specialist services are not combining their expertise; a united front is needed to tackle the variety of factors that manifest in truancy (*The Gisborne*

Herald, 3 March, 2010). Experts informing the debate acknowledge there is no one definition of truancy, and variously attribute causes and solutions within schools, individual children, parents, the economy and the community in general. The assessment of the nature of the problem vacillates within the discursive boundaries established in the nineteenth century. In this sense, contemporary crises of truancy in New Zealand appear to be based on a continuing 'imaginary rationale', that is, one where the causes and consequences are portrayed in ways which serve the competing interests of a range of social and political actors.

An examination of the historical debates has demonstrated that truancy is an interminable problem. The category of truancy is a malleable container for contradictory social ideals that allows both schools and the government to produce the notion of truancy 'crisis' through oppositional preferences, managing the rights and duties bestowed through universal education. Located in this 'imaginary space' truancy was produced and will remain an interminable problem.

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