

Eugenics and the 'backward child'

New Zealand, 1877-1910

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By the early twentieth century, eugenics, or the science of heredity as it was called, was gaining momentum throughout much of the industrialising world. New Zealand was no exception. Encapsulating a social movement, as well as its doctrines and practices, eugenics provided a convenient and 'scientifically' convincing argument that the source of social problems and the statistically demonstrated decline and degeneration of the national population lay in genetic weaknesses. The ideas and values which underpinned eugenic thought were drawn upon in the development of environmental, social, medical and educational policies and interventions which sought to enhance the genetic quality of the population. This included selective breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable traits, and controlled breeding to eradicate hereditary disease and thus halt on-going degeneration.

Environment and education

Although identifying nature over nurture as both cause and remedy of human failings, some eugenicists recognised the benefits of early environmental intervention. This had educational impacts for girls in New Zealand where [Truby King](#), founder of the The Society for the Health of Women and Children (Plunket Society), successfully argued that teaching the science of mothering would halt racial degeneration just as it would stem at source 'the main supplies of population for our asylums, hospitals, benevolent institutions, goals and slums' (AJHR 1906 H-7: 9). Managing the population also involved the categorisation of those seemingly in need of specialised educational provision within the segregated institutions and classes which were developed and extended throughout the twentieth century. Education of 'the backward child' emerged from this context.

Eugenics: from London to Dunedin

On 23rd August 1910 the *Otago Daily Times* carried an article entitled 'The Coming Race: Heredity and Selection' that announced the inauguration, the previous evening, of a New Zealand Branch of the London Eugenics Education Society in Dunedin. A.H. Grinling, a journalist for the newspaper, told the assembled group of the founding of the parent society, and of its aims and objectives. They heard how the ideas of Francis Galton, first mooted in the 1860s, had gained the support of the University College London and were ultimately incorporated into The Eugenics Laboratory at that institution under the direction of Professor Karl Pearson. It was 'with a view to popularising' results from the laboratory work that The London Eugenics Education Society had been established in 1907. New Zealand was the first of the Dominions, and Dunedin the first city, to have followed suit.

Notable amongst the speakers at the meeting and the elected members of the Society's Council were church ministers, university professors, medical doctors, solicitors, parliamentarians and educationalists. [Dr Emily Siedeberg](#) rationalised the work of the society:

Those whose work enable them to follow the life history of feeble-minded or degenerate men and women, had no difficulty in citing cases where the offspring of these creatures are found to fill our prisons and industrial schools with dangerous criminals. The need was forced upon them of some legislation which would give a magistrate power to isolate these people in a home of detention for their whole lives.

the seas. The range of eugenic science was exceedingly wide, and its scope extremely varied. It comprised—(1) Biology in so far as that branch of learning was concerned with heredity and selection; (2) anthropology in so far as it threw light on questions of race and the priceless institution of marriage; (3) politics (in the classical and broad sense of the word) in so far as they bore on parenthood in relation to civic worth; (4) ethics in so far as they promoted ideals that led up to the improvement of social quality; and (5) religion in so far as it strengthened and sanctified the sense of eugenic duty. Here, then, was the platform upon which all men might meet. Whatever antagonism might exist in other departments of life and work, a common interest in the welfare of the race here bound all men together. Scientists, educationalists, publicists of every shade of thought and opinion, economists, philanthropists, religionists, and rationalists might in the eugenic field, without sacrifice of principle or loss of dignity, combine to sink their differences and agree to meet together and discuss impartially and impersonally

Figure 1: From the the *Otago Times*, 1910, 23 August

Dr Siedeberg's summing of the concerns of the Society was clear and concise. It was an equally clear and concise expression of the attitudes that had framed responses to managing those who were perceived to be problems for New Zealand society during the 19th century. It was little wonder that the eugenic message had taken hold in the intervening years, and that, when packaged and delivered in the formal Dunedin arena, became the panacea for the nation's problems. Segregated educational institutions had an important task to fulfil, but they had their genesis in New Zealand's earliest European educational endeavours.

Race and class interventions

Early missionary schooling was focused primarily on Maori. To the missionaries, preparation for European settlement and readiness to receive the Christian gospel required that Maori become socialised to European ways, and education was seen to be an important means through which this objective could be achieved. Schooling for Maori was grounded in the belief that, because they were

in need of civilising, the children and the wider Maori community would benefit from missionary intervention. Similar motivations underpinned efforts by nineteenth century settler reformers to intervene in the socialisation and control of settler children who were struggling to cope with the rigorous conditions and social pressures of colonial life. The practice of isolating the groups known as neglected and criminal children in the country's early industrial schools was justified on the grounds that as agencies of sound moral correction, the institutions would not only support social stability, but they would also offer hope of redemption for the children. When the Native and Industrial Schools both came under state control on 10th October 1867, a focus on correcting what was considered to be a-social or uncivilised behaviour was maintained.

Value distinctions that shaped notions of racial and class superiority were firmly embedded in early practices in Native and Industrial Schools. Such distinctions readily accommodated ideas about intellectual 'backwardness' that were facilitated with the nationalising of state education. The 1877 Education Act in New Zealand made education free, secular and compulsory. It also secured the conditions for the introduction, the following year, of the standards—a programme of instruction against which most primary school pupils would be assessed and judged as eligible (or not) for promotion to the next level. As compulsory attendance became more rigorously enforced, the number of children taking the annual standards examinations increased. Those who did not meet

the educational expectations that were laid down in the standards were unable to be promoted with their age peers, and became officially recognised as failures.

Inventing and managing the 'backward child'

Inspectors commenting on children being held back from advancing from the infants suggested irregular attendance, late entry to school, unsatisfactory teaching, poor health and natural dullness as possible explanations (Winterbourn 1944: 20-21). They were of two minds about how best to accommodate such children, with some advocating the advantages of social promotion and others favouring promotion by merit. One inspector felt that enforcing attendance through the 1894 truancy legislation would inundate schools with backward children who should be accommodated in segregated settings to facilitate their preparation for the higher standards. The "problem of the backward child" had emerged.

By 1900, the issues that were highlighted by the 1877 legislation were being understood in terms of the new knowledge about children that educationalists around the world were developing and sharing through professional networks. This included G. Stanley Hall's statistically grounded child study method and his establishment of the first institute of child psychology in America, the impact of developmental psychology, and measures of intelligence initiated in 1905 by Binet and Simon's (1915) measuring scale. At this time the teachers' professional organisation, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) began expressing concerns about the inordinate amount of time teachers were having to devote to backward children at the expense of their classmates. According to Winterbourn, amongst educational personnel, attitudes of scorn and resentment had dominated perceptions of these children. 'It appears', he argued, 'that the majority of the teachers and inspectors still regarded backward children as the product of one or other of the sins of laziness, poor attendance, or a slow wit' (Winterbourn 1944: 26). Categorising the backward child as a classroom liability accommodated a eugenically informed understanding that poor educational performance was linked to attitudinal, moral and/or mental defectiveness that, at this time in the nation's history, came to be understood in biological or hereditarian terms.

Defining the problem in terms of eugenics

Following hard on the heels of political and educational centralisation in New Zealand had been a period of economic depression, the social impact of which highlighted issues relating to health, sanitation, disease, morality, crime and education. This became the focus of the liberal government's welfare legislation in the 1890s and intersected with a developing interest in eugenics. Eugenic thought, as advanced by Francis Galton was grounded in an irrefutable belief in the predominance of heredity over social environment. Galton contended that intellectual and manual capacities, mental and physical traits, and tendencies to disease and health, were innately determined. The task of eugenics was to fulfil both a positive and a negative function—to improve human heredity, eradicate hereditary disease and thus halt on-going degeneration. The chief mechanism through which this was to be achieved was through enhanced or controlled breeding.

Eugenicists drew also on the arguments of English economist, Thomas Malthus, who contended that the rate of population increase was dependent on the available means of subsistence, and that natural catastrophes such as famine and epidemics would operate as a 'misery check' to maintain sustainable population levels. Those most susceptible, Malthus (1803) argued, were the poor, whose poverty was a function of their uncontrolled and excessive breeding. It was therefore felt by eugenicists that indiscriminate intervention on behalf of society's 'losers' should be avoided. The supposed benefits of charitable, medical or educational intervention designed to artificially preserve

the unfit were not only considered injurious to the eugenic health of the nation, but were seen to be temporary and wasteful, and only effective for the individual being supported. Inevitably the unchanged (and unchangeable) trait would still be passed on to ensuing generations. Society needed to be educated about such matters, and initiatives to address the problems should be shaped by formal state policy and direction.

Although the eugenics movement remained quite small in New Zealand, it was not short on influence. Membership included welfare workers, philanthropists, clergy and experts in fields such as medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and criminology. Many belonged concurrently to several groups which were particularly interested in the eugenic message, including women's groups such as the National Council of Women and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Of critical importance was the representation of politicians and local body bureaucrats, whose endorsement of eugenic beliefs lent weight to having them recognized in legislation.

Anxiety about the birth-rate

In 1903, when politician and surgeon Dr William Chapple published his virulent exposition of the country's disturbing decline in birth rate and what he identified as the associated problem of 'the fertility of the unfit', he was quick to justify public anxiety and to posit possible solutions. Chapple expressed what he saw as the source of the problem. 'The birth-rate is rapidly declining amongst the most fit to produce the best offspring, while it is steadily maintained amongst the least fit, so that the relative proportion of the unfit born into the world is annually increasing' (Chapple 1903: 8).

Survival of the fittest



Figure 2: William Chapple c 1908. National Library of New Zealand, PAColl-0838-2-566

Chapple's arguments addressed a number of concerns being expressed in New Zealand at the time and therefore appealed to diverse sectors of the community. In his introduction he drew the reader's attention to the Darwinian based argument of survival of the fittest which provided legitimisation for colonisation, the relative success of Pakeha over Maori, and the increasing dominance of the middle class. His reflection on criminal inheritance as being specific to the lower class appealed to those who were concerned about the growth of the urban sector. He provided statistical evidence of increased

dependence on state or other forms of support which resonated with those who were protesting against increased taxation. In so doing, Chapple identified 'the criminal, the pauper, the idiot and imbecile, the lunatic, the drunkard, the deformed, and diseased' as 'the fit man's burden' (Chapple 1903: xii).

National efficiency and improving the quality of the population

Questions about national efficiency and the quality of the population as a national resource were also raised to address the disturbing evidence of substandard physical strength and general health that had been identified during the medical examinations that were part of the recruitment programme for the South African War. Along with births and deaths, according to Chapple, migration was the third factor to 'make up the population question' (Chapple 1903: 10). The intention to restrict immigration, particularly of people of Chinese origin, had been debated in parliament from the 1870s and Chapple's treatise provided scientific "proof" on which anti-alien sentiments and lobbying could be legitimated. Finally, his arguments and the opportunity to

formulate appropriate response, appealed to the professional sector of the emerging middle class who were busily carving out a niche for their expertise within the vast array of new social problems.

Solving the problem of the 'backward child'

The solution to the problem of the backward child most commonly put forward was segregation and a concentrated effort to bring the child in line with his/her peers. This solution was increasingly seen in medical terms as NZEI members began lobbying for a school medical service to assist in diagnosing the causes of backwardness. However, it was the children in the industrial schools who provided the greatest stimulus for action. An enduring concern to differentiate between destitute and delinquent children gained momentum at the turn of the century and prompted the Inspector-General of Schools, [George Hogben](#), to call for a review of legislation relating to industrial schools. For the former group Hogben advocated boarding out as the most appropriate strategy. For the latter he thought it necessary to delineate possible causes of juvenile crime in order to have prescribed appropriate treatment. In a report on dependent children, Hogben identified six such causes to include environmental factors; parents who were neglectful, weak and wanting in control; and an 'inherited low physical and moral nature' (AJHR 1900 E-3: 2). In Hogben's list, it appears that the sins of the fathers and mothers had come to rest with the sons and daughters. The impact of eugenic thought had penetrated the ranks of the influential education bureaucracy. The reorganisation of the industrial school system was to allow for the segregation of what were characterised as the more difficult types of young people in newly established reformatories.



Figure 3: George Hogben, caricature. (NZ Truth, 15 May 1915). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Rather ironically, the first of the reformatories was also the first formal response to having the needs of children who were being classified as backward recognised at an administrative level. Hogben's active involvement with the NZEI as a founding member and past-president, and his experience as an education board inspector, had made him particularly aware of issues raised by those involved in education at the chalk face, and receptive to recommendations that intervention was urgently needed. In 1907 he travelled to the UK, Europe and America to examine educational initiatives which had been established for backward children. In reporting on his investigation, Hogben noted that he had been particularly impressed with ungraded classes being trialled in Chicago 'for subnormal or incorrigible children' who, for a variety of reasons, were experiencing difficulty with the regular school programme (AJHR 1908 E-15). However, the special classes which Hogben had envisaged were slow to develop in New Zealand, despite advocacy from inspectors, NZEI members, and school medical officers. It was not until the Education Act of 1914 that similarly conceived special classes were introduced.

Inventing the special school

Hogben was impressed also with Chicago's Parental School for feeble-minded boys. While he was in London he secured the services of George Benstead, a specialist in the field, to take control of a residential facility which he planned to have established at Otekaike the following year as the first stage of a proposed dual residential school/special class system of educational provision for backward pupils. Chicago's Parental School

was drawn on as an archetype, and as a working financial model in its initial stages. The Otekaike Special School was considered by New Zealand's Minister of Education as being for boys 'capable of being trained in some degree' (AJHR 1910 E-1: 26). On taking up his position, Bernstead confirmed the new student identity.

When training institutions similar to ours at Otekaike were first founded it was thought that it would be possible to fit the feeble-minded for all the duties and enjoyments of life, so that they could carry out their individual rights of citizenship. After some years of experience, however, it was found that in the majority of cases this was an impossible task. The peculiarities of temperament, the lack of inhibitory powers, apathy, and other idiosyncrasies which, more or less, are concomitants of mental defect, are generally so persistent that at no time can the majority of feeble-minded persons be looked upon as responsible members of society (AJHR 1910 E-4: 9).

Referring to the students as 'absolutely useless units', Bernstead wanted to ensure that the state gained 'a practical return' for the money spent on their incarceration. Under 'expert supervision', it was argued, manual employment would enable them to make a contribution towards the cost of their maintenance in the institution (AJHR 1910 E-4: 10). The passage of the youngster who may have at one time failed to pass his or her standards examination, to the status of dull-witted and finally morally and mentally deficient (non)citizen had been successfully completed by their enlightened benefactors. Moreover, as Bernstead assured, the institution was also 'lessening the misery of the world, and preventing the increase of the helpless and hopeless section of the Empire' (AJHR 1910 E-4: 10).

Institutionalising an ideology

The eugenicists' claims of intergenerational family degeneracy were increasingly demonstrated through their use of the human "pedigree" (e.g. Goddard 1912), a statistically sophisticated analysis of a family's genetic information which concluded that social ills such as poverty, alcoholism, prostitution and criminality were all by-products of this one genetic flaw. Providing this information as visible evidence of degenerative heredity was a convincing force in the eugenic argument. Preventing the transmission of undesirable traits became a major task of institutional segregation and the increasing diversity of the populations for whom such provision would be established.

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