

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN IRELAND.

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Public interest in this city has of late been aroused in certain features of Irish Elementary, or as we call it, Primary Education. Such questions as the feeding of destitute school children, the medical inspection of schools, and, quite recently, the establishment of day industrial schools, have been discussed in press and on platform—all questions influencing not merely the fortunes of the individual scholars, but the future welfare of the nation as a whole.

While active interest shows a healthy state of public opinion, it must be remembered that these questions are really dealing with abnormal types of school children, and do not, perhaps, concern so intimately the bulk of scholars in our National Schools.

In this paper your attention is drawn to the Irish Education Act of 1892, upon the efficient working of which must positively depend—as I hope to confirm by figures—the general success of Irish Elementary Education as a whole; and as an indirect consequence the future character and industrial development of the nation.

It is proposed, therefore, to examine the nature of School Attendance required by law, and to note the lines along which is carried the principle of compulsion embodied in the Act in question.

In general, the Act requires that all parents in the area to which it is applicable, shall send their children between the ages of 6 and 14 years to a National or some other efficient school in the manner set out in the first schedule; or else must give proof that they are receiving sufficient elementary education elsewhere.

It should be noted that the compulsion lies only in the attendance, and not in the type of education; but since the bulk of the people in Ireland are too poor to pay for their children's education, and since there are few free voluntary elementary schools, it follows that poor parents are in the end compelled under this Act to send their children to schools maintained in accordance with the regulations of the Commissioners of National Education.

It should be stated at the outset of this paper that I am not concerned with the curriculum or policy of the

Board of National Education, but merely with the point as to whether the School Attendance Provisions of the Act of 1892 give adequate guarantee of an efficient education to the large number of scholars on the rolls of our National Schools.

The importance and magnitude of the problem will be realised when I state that there are 8,337 day schools in operation, with 699,945 pupils, under the National Board.

The education of these—one-sixth of the nation in number—is made or marred by the Act under discussion. This follows because, as I shall show by figures, there seems such a general apathy in educational matters among the parents of the bulk of the children in National Schools, that the extent of their schooling largely depends upon the compulsory attendance clauses of the Act in question. It is not within the scope of this paper to inquire to what causes—historical, social, or economic—this apathy may be ascribed. Happy exceptions, too, are always to be found, to give hope for the future, as in the case known to the writer of the poor labourer who in the evening used to chalk on the floor of his tenement-room the multiplication table for the instruction of his son.

Also, as I hope to show, the Act has in principle a demoralising and reactionary effect upon parental responsibility.

AIMS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION.

Before examining its terms in detail, let me give a general definition of elementary education, which I shall take from the last Report of the Commissioners of National Education, with whom, on this occasion, I fancy we shall find ourselves in hearty agreement.†

“The chief aims of all primary education,” are stated to be, “the formation of character, the training in good habits, and the development of intelligence . . . these functions of the school,” we are told, “far exceed in permanent value any temporary results that may be secured in storing the mind with information or merely cultivating the memory.”

Add to this, a knowledge of the three “R’s,” and you have the fundamental requirements which competence in any occupation presupposes and to which, in some form or other, every child born into this world of to-day has, it is contended, a right; and apart from ethical considerations without which no ordinary child can ever hope to advance in life.

† Seventy-seventh Report, Cd. 5903, 1911, at p. 12.

How far then, the question is, are these things reasonably secured under the Act to the child attending a National School.

Let us turn to the details of this Act, of which, as it has been now in force for twenty years, there can scarcely be any doubt.

We have alluded to the general duty placed upon parents in certain cases and subject to certain exceptions specified in the Act, of sending their children between the ages of 6 and 14 years to school.

NATURE OF LEGAL ATTENDANCE.

What is the extent of this attendance? This, and this alone: 75 complete attendances in each half-year ending the 30th June and 31st December respectively; or 150 attendances in all in the year.

Now, by the Regulations of the Board of National Education, "the normal school year consists of 44 weeks, or 220 school days." The attendance required, however, from the pupil is, on an average, over 3 and less than 4 days a week of the 5 days during which the school must by the regulations remain open.

Further, there is nothing to prevent this being so disposed that, as it often is in fact, not merely many days, but entire weeks should elapse between the visits of the child to school.

Here is a specific instance taken from the roll of a National School in Dublin recording "legal" attendance:—

TABLE SHOWING HOW A. B. MADE 75 ATTENDANCES OUT OF 112 FOR THE HALF-YEAR ENDED JUNE 30TH, 1910.

Week.	Number of Days of Attendance.	Week.	Number of Days of Attendance.
1	3	14	0
2	3	15	5
3	3	16	5
4	3	17	3
5	3	18	4
6	2	19	4
7	3	20	0
8	1	21	5
9	4	22	3
10	3	23	2
11	4	24	4
12	3	25	3
13	0	26	2
	35		40

Total number of school days ... 112
 Total attendances made ... 75

Taking five days as the working school week, there are only three weeks in all of complete attendance, five weeks with only four days' attendance each, eleven weeks with only three days' attendance in each, three weeks with only two days' attendance in each, one week with only one day's attendance, and three weeks without any attendance at all! This example may be taken as typical.

How bad this state of affairs is for the child and how hopeless for the teacher to do efficient work in these conditions may easily be imagined.

The formation of character, intelligence, and good habits, especially that of application, alluded to above, must be seriously handicapped in the case of such attendance.

There can be none of that continuity of instruction so necessary for a child's mind, especially in regard to the particular characteristics of the Irish child.

A child might, for instance, leave school at one point in the course of instruction in arithmetic, to return some weeks after when the class was engaged in, say, square measure, having lost instruction in the necessary link of, say, the mystery of multiplication. The lesson could have no meaning to him. Again, take a history class; the child might leave with Cromwell master of the situation, and return to find King William on the throne. The child might well wonder how he got there; and if he chanced that term to end his schooling, he might never know.

The whole progress of the class may thus be imperilled. For the absentees on their return are unable, perhaps, to derive benefit from the new lesson unless the teacher spends the time of the class in explaining what has been missed, in which case their ignorance is a hindrance to the progress of the remainder.

Systematic home-work, on the part of the truants, must be also quite out of the question.

It may be urged that these are only theoretical and *a priori* objections overruled by facts. It were well if it were so, and that the people's passion for education as a whole had carried them beyond the inadequate requirements of this Act. It is not so. Look to the latest figures available:

Of the 679,435 children on the rolls 57,859, or 8.5 per cent. put in under 50 attendances; and 74,300, or 11 per cent., under 100 attendances in the year ending the 31st December, 1910.

It is hardly to be imagined that ill-health, poverty, or bad weather was responsible for this low number of attendances.

Let us go to the other extreme. Only 27,095; or 4 per

cent., attended more than 200 days in the year. It might, indeed, be too much to expect this standard of perfection from robust children, in whom a touch of truancy shows a healthy independence; but what in fact is the attendance of the bulk of the children? Out of the 679,435 only 322,089 in the first half-year of 1910 put in 75 or more attendances, and the corresponding number for the second half-year was 240,715. Of these, 116,733, that is to say, roughly, over a sixth of the future nation, are turned out hall-marked as "educated," who only in fact have complied with the Act by 150 attendances. That is, the schooling of, roughly, 100,000 children has been conducted in the inadequate manner of which a particular instance has been given.

It would take much accuracy to estimate all the forces which account for the apathy of the people in the matter of elementary education. Causes historical and climatic† are undoubtedly operating; and, also, if I might venture to say so, the fact of compulsion upon the poor parent to send his child to school without the added compulsion of direct payment for the education given.

THE EFFECT OF A SCHOOL TAX.

Free choice in action is often a stimulus to doing a thing well. Add compulsion to the doing, and the interest in doing it well may abate, unless it be revived by some direct payment being also exacted, thus creating the desire of "getting value for one's money."

The poor parent does, in fact, pay for the child's schooling through the indirect taxes he or she pays in purchasing tea, sugar, tobacco, and the like, but the parental responsibility of educating the child is not thus brought home as directly as it might be were a specific fee of some few pence each week or month exacted.

Though Irish Primary Education costs the nation, in a Parliamentary Grant, £1,396,401, there is not, it must be remembered, a direct school-rate struck in Ireland, save in the financially, but not otherwise, small matter of maintaining a School Attendance Committee; so that local interest is not usually aroused in the efficiency of a school.

Certain sums, it is true, for such things as heating, cleaning and the like are only given by the Treasury on condition that local voluntary effort supplies a certain sum as well. But to such sums the parents of the children in the school may, in fact, contribute nothing.

† That is, the enervating influence of the climate in many parts of Ireland is not counteracted by an efficient system of public health, or by medical inspection, and physical training in the National Schools.

A national school-tax might remedy the general indifference of parents to educational efficiency. This suggestion, if adopted, would not necessarily give the control of the school to local ratepayers in matters of the course of studies or religious instruction, though it might rightly entail local responsibility for the efficient working of the school.

LOOPHOLES IN THE ACT.

To turn to other details of the Act, it will be seen many loopholes of escape are afforded to the parent from the duty, solemnly enunciated in a marginal note of the Act, of sending a child to school.

If, for instance, the child does not live within two miles of an efficient school at which it can attend it need not be sent by the parents. In England, it should be noted, in this case the local authority is empowered to provide, out of the local rates, conveyances to fetch children to school. The attendance in Ireland is worse naturally in the rural districts, where distances are great, than in the urban centres. Yet it would seem that in the agricultural, rather than in the industrial development of the country, the immediate need for a better education lies. Now, a horse and car is not difficult to obtain in the country; could not some organised system be adopted universally in the country parts, even by voluntary agency, of getting the number of children to school. It should be noted that wet weather often makes the short cut "across the bog" impassable, while the route by road to the school may be too long to walk.

Also, any employment of the child, in the words of the Act, "in the necessary operations of husbandry and the ingathering of crops or in the fisheries," is a reasonable excuse for non-attendance. These phrases are capable of great elasticity before a bench of easy-going magistrates.

It is obvious that there is great danger in the country districts of Ireland, where we are told labour is so scarce, that many parents may avail themselves of the agricultural clauses and that children may be employed to the immediate profit of the family, yet to the sacrifice of the future efficiency of the nation.

The bye-laws of the city in the matter of general juvenile trading leave much to be desired.

STREET-TRADING BYE-LAWS IN DUBLIN.

No child under 11 may trade in the streets of Dublin. Juvenile street traders over 12 and under 14 are, if they have reached the IV. standard—that is, show proficiency in the three R's—allowed to trade provided they also attend the number of times, 150, required by the Act in a

school. While still under 14 they are in consequence prevented from trading in school hours, but no greater attendance can be required by the present bye-laws than the meagre amount of the Act. This "dunce's certificate"—as the examination of the Act declares it to be—required by the Corporation is almost useless. The bye-laws do not, in fact, allow refusal of a licence to any child of school age save on grounds of "physical or mental deficiency." That is to say, the educational antecedents of the boy or girl are quite overlooked. It may have never entered in the mind of their parents to send them to school until required to do so as a condition of their street-trading or other employment. In the case of such children, once the "call of the streets" has gripped them, there is little sign that they derive any benefit from the attendance required.

TENEMENT HOUSES.

In many cases—as in Dublin—the staff of School Inspectors is not sufficient to enable them to do their work efficiently. Here, for instance, 18 Inspectors have to control the attendance of 45,000 children, and here their best efforts are baffled by an economic evil, the presence of which shows how closely one social problem is allied to another. Most of the poor of Dublin—those, in fact, for whom the National Schools exist—live in one-room tenements which they rent, not from the Corporation, nor from building companies, as in other big cities, but from individual landlords—generally themselves middlemen. "It is computed," says a recent report of a School Attendance Officer, "that roughly 22,000 families in all live in this way in the slums of our city. To secure the regular attendance of the children of these families is not a matter of easy accomplishment. It might be done if the occupiers of the tenement houses were permanent residents, but the greater proportion of them are a kind of floating population, depending on chance for a living, and being unable to pay their weekly rent are ejected, and remove to some other district, there to undergo a similar process of ejection in due course. This migratory style of existence is both baffling and disappointing to the best efforts of the School Attendance Officers, and the extent to which it is indulged in can be imagined when it is stated that there are upwards of 250 ejection cases disposed of in the Police Courts weekly."

Pending some better housing of the poor it would seem necessary to make compulsory some registration at the School Attendance Office by the immediate landlord of

such weekly tenants, on the entry of new, or the departure of old, tenants.

The whole position of school attendance in relation to juvenile labour in Ireland is very unsatisfactory. I shall not go into the general objections to juvenile labour of particular kinds—as that question has been exhaustively dealt with by Dr. J. R. O'Connell in a paper recently read before this Society.⁽¹⁾

TENDENCY OF ENGLISH LEGISLATION.

It should be noted that the very proper tendency of English legislation, in allowing children below the school age to work—whether as wholly or partly exempt from school attendance—is to look not merely to the book-work knowledge of the child by requiring a certificate of proficiency of having reached a certain standard, and being acquainted with the three “R’s”; but also to require that the child-worker, whether as a “whole” or “half-timer,” shall have also put in a definite number of attendances, according to the local bye-law, in not more than two schools during each year in the five preceding years. In the case of children between 13 and 14 years totally exempt from school, 350 attendances (the English attendances being two in each day) in each of the five preceding years, and the VII. Standard of Scholarship are often required. In addition, in all cases of partial exemption, daily attendance on the part of “half-timers” is required. In this way there is the recognition of the school to be something of a formative influence towards habits of application, regularity, and discipline, as well as a mere place to acquire knowledge.

Allusion has been already made to the indiscriminate employment of children in agriculture in rural districts in Ireland.

This danger is provided against in England by the principle laid down in the Elementary Education Act of 1876, whereby a child is only allowed to be employed in agriculture during periods specified by the local authority, such periods not to exceed in the whole six weeks in each year.

Again, in England, by the principle long established in successive Workshop and Factory Acts, the child working in a factory must, if a “half-timer,” attend school for a “half-time” attendance on each work-day, or else, if working “whole-time,” attend school for a complete attendance on each alternate days. Further, to ensure this attendance, it is the duty of the manager of every factory or workshop every Monday in every working week to obtain from the teacher a certificate of the required attendance; and an insufficient number of attendances in one

(1) *Journal*, Vol. XII., p. 489.

week must be made up for in the next. It has already been pointed out that not merely educational proficiency, but a good previous school-attendance is also required.

In the application to Ireland of the Workshop and Factory Act this point seems overlooked. There is no allusion apparently in the Privy Council Order whereby the Factory and Workshop Act, 1901, is extended to Ireland, to any record of previous due attendance, a mere certificate of proficiency in the subjects of the Fifth Standard allowing Irish children to work in factories and the like

A daily attendance of two hours or alternate "whole" day attendance at school, as the case may be, is indeed required by this Order; but the weekly certificate of compliance with the Act in this respect from the teacher to the employer seems not to be required by law in Ireland—though I may be wrong in thus interpreting the adaption of the Act

And as regards this daily attendance, I find that, of the 3,550 half-time pupils on the rolls of National schools, the average daily attendance amounted only to 1,735 in the school year of 1910—less than half of the child-workers in the country!

Further, all these schools, with the exception of one in Cork, are situated in Ulster.

Hence it would seem that the Factory and Workshop Act is not rigorously enforced in Dublin, where there may be many children under school age employed in industries.

But it is quite obvious that a condition precedent of the proper advancement of all classes in the community—from the agricultural farm hand of Donegal to the newsboys of Dublin—must ultimately depend for success upon a sound elementary education.

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY.

One more detail in the Act. It does not act as a sufficient deterrent, as our magistrates have told us over and over again, to parents against neglect of their child's schooling.

Many weeks must elapse before the School Attendance Officer can bring the neglectful parent before the Court, and when at length the prosecution has been sustained the magistrate is not allowed to do more under the Act than make an Attendance Order and inflict a fine *not* exceeding five shillings, including costs.

If this order is disregarded the technical machinery requires at least a two months' delay, or as the Wicklow magistrates hold, six months' delay, before the parent can be brought to book before the Court for disregarding an Attendance Order. In the words of the Act:

"A complaint under this section with respect to a continuing non-compliance with an Attendance Order shall not be repeated by the School Attendance Committee at any less interval than two months."

In the meantime incalculable harm may be done to the child who is absent

ACT NOT IN OPERATION.

But bad as the Act is its saddest feature is, to use an Irish bull, when it is not there at all, for it only comes into force when the Local Authority, the Rural District Council or the Municipality, chooses to adopt it. Thus, there are 40 towns having Municipal Government to which the provisions of the Act apply where School Attendance Committees have not been appointed by the Local Authority. There are, similarly, over 100 Rural Districts where the local Councils have neglected or declined to put the Act in force. The number and extent of children who fail to obtain any education is, therefore, in these localities, an unknown factor so far as the State is concerned. On the other hand, 90 Municipal Authorities and 136 Rural Districts have happily established Attendance Committees, in which cases the school attendance is yearly improving.

After twenty years of Compulsory Education we find that a large portion of our people cannot read or write, in proof of which I refer you to some figures, which will incidentally show you how little we keep abreast in efficiency with the English system.

ILLITERACY IN IRELAND.

A rough proof of the relative progress of the two countries will be found in the facts that in a recent year of those voting at elections in Ireland over 10 per cent. could not write; the corresponding number in England and Wales is less than 2 per cent. This, indeed, may not be a fair test, because there is such a passion for politics with us that many a man, for divers personal reasons, likes his neighbour to know how he votes. But no one, however, likes to appear illiterate before his "better-half." Take, therefore, the signing of the marriage register by mark, representing, in part, the young Ireland. Over 5 per cent., and in the country parts, over 6 or 7 per cent., do so by mark in Ireland, the corresponding figure for

the rest of the United Kingdom is less than 2 per cent. Even reducing these figures by half, to allow for the way in which they are estimated, the balance is not in our favour. Mr. Graham Balfour, the educationalist, estimated not ten years ago that one-eighth of the Irish people were illiterate. The superiority of the English figures can only be ascribed to the high standard of attendance required by law, the English Education Acts requiring attendance on every occasion the school is open. Here are some more comparative figures. The average daily attendance in Dublin is 78 per cent. of those on the register of the National Schools—in London over 89 per cent., and 90 per cent. in Birmingham in certain cases.

Where the Act is not adopted, of course, the standard is hopelessly low. The melancholy result may be seen in a country town, not far from a great industrial city beyond the Boyne, where the Northern iron may be supposed to have stiffened the character of the people. Here only 61 per cent. of the children on the roll daily attend.

It should be noted that the Education Office has power to make bye-laws for school attendance, where, in England, the local authority fails to do so, but that apparently no such power is exercised by the Irish Board of Education.

Such a record of educational destitution in the near past must inevitably be felt in the morale and efficiency of the nation for many years to come and inevitably handicap the development of Technical and Agricultural Education, through which alone the material prosperity of the country can be secured.

If proof were needed I would point out that the Technical Schools in this city are forced to hold introductory classes in Elementary Mathematics and English for many of their pupils.

CONCLUSIONS.

Such, briefly, are the consequences flowing from the weakness of the so-called Compulsory School Attendance Act of 1892.

Two things are required to remedy the situation.

First, daily attendance on every occasion the school is open, should be enforced in the case of the ordinary child, with more stringent penalties against neglectful parents. It should also be possible to raise the school-age where needful by a magistrate's order, in, for instance, the case of backward children. I would go so far as to allow no child to leave school until he or she had passed a certain standard, extending, if needful, the age limit to eighteen years.

Secondly, attendance at some form of Technical or Continuation School should be made compulsory up to twenty-one years of age upon any person employed in a "blind-alley" occupation. Thus the high industrial capacity of the individual who, say, left the National school at 14 years, having reached the highest standard, is preserved, through the opportunities afforded of regularly using his intellectual faculties in some form of Commercial or Trade School. Otherwise the educational qualifications of the boy or girl in some "blind-alley" occupation, as selling papers or flowers in the street, unless in exceptional cases of an almost unnatural love of learning, must deteriorate on their leaving school.

The great blemish in the Act I have analysed seems to be that the measure of a mere percentage is made the standard of parental responsibility. This gives a reactionary and demoralising standard which indifferent parents easily adopt.

From the evil effects of that ill-considered piece of legislation, the country will take long to recover. Disbelief in education may be abroad. If it is, let me conclude with a quotation as an antidote to this most insidious of social poisons. In the words of the Consultative Committee of the English Board of Education in their Report on Attendance, Compulsory or Otherwise, at Continuation Schools:

"A difficult issue is raised by the question whether increased opportunities of education enhance the happiness of the mass of the people. . . . All turns upon what is meant by happiness. Education may well destroy the easy-going comfort of a thoughtless mind. It may impart a desire for an intellectual or artistic occupation which the individual has not the means or the opportunity of entering. It may stimulate ambitions which may not be realised. It may increase a man's sensitiveness to the hardship and limitations of his lot. Like all great changes it brings evil with it as well as good. But few would identify true happiness with obtuseness of feeling, coarseness of sympathy and torpor of mind. The right kind of education working upon a character which is susceptible to its power gives a man adaptability, self-reliance, balance of thought, sobriety of judgment. It may raise him above self-interest and beyond the reach of individual disappointment to a point of view from which he sees the whole of which his individual life is but a part, and may bring him to the state of mind in which he finds a real happiness in work well done."