On the whole, however, I think that the Department has no cause to be very dissatisfied with the attendance of the Maori children. There are many conditions affecting the attendance of the children in the face of which a set of regulations compelling attendance indiscriminately would be too severe. In several Native schools children are to be found who daily travel to and from school distances of from two to seven or nine, and even in one case fourteen miles each way. Nor is there any compulsion about their attendance, and it would be unreasonable to make them come in all weathers, though many of them do so voluntarily because they like school. The remoteness of the habitations, especially in gumfields districts, has thus a considerable effect on the attendance.

Another serious matter is the want of food during the day. Maori children, as a rule, are accustomed to a morning and an evening meal. When they tramp away to school they very rarely indeed take food with them, and I have known them to be the whole day without a bite. Surely this must have its effect upon their constitution, and there can be little room for wonder why they are so liable to fall victims to sickness of one kind or another. Remonstrance with their parents seems to have little effect beyond perhaps bringing forth the remark that they have no food or no money. And yet these people in places spend their whole time at playing cards or billiards, another factor which not only militates considerably against the success of several of our schools, but which also, in my opinion, is one of the greatest curses that has ever come upon the Maori. In no part within my knowledge does the billiard-table work such havoc with the people, and consequently with the children, as in Hokianga and Far-north districts. The children are often kept up all night billiard-marking, and are utterly unfit to come to school or to work when they do come.

The Maoris are pauperised by gambling: in one place it was reported that they had gambled away their crops. They are therefore in winter time unable to supply either food or clothing for their children, who have to suffer in consequence. The billiard-table is even made part of the furnishing of a tangi. To one gathering of this kind three tables were conveyed, and wherever a Land Court is assembled they are to be found in numbers. I ascribe a considerable amount of the poverty amongst the people, the consequent fluctuating attendance at their schools and much suffering amongst the people generally to the pernicious influence of these billiard-tables which are to be seen on the gumfields, in the ka nga, and even on the very roadside. Whatever steps are taken to ameliorate the conditions of the Maori the suppression of these gambling-dens should be among the very first. There can be no doubt, however, that the greatest factors in producing a good attendance at a Native school are the inherent attraction that the school itself has for the children and the confidence the parents have in the master. That is to say the attendance in many cases depends largely upon the teacher himself, and falling off in the attendance should be to him the occasion for a little introspection.

Schools that ran down to an attendance of nine, twenty-five, forty, twenty-nine have now, under a change of teacher, forty, fifty, eighty-six, and ninety-two respectively; and, what is more, this attendance has been maintained for some time. In other cases, a change for the worse has sometimes taken place, and a school of sixty speedily reduced to twenty or thirty. In such a case, unfortunately, the teacher looks for the cause externally; he blames the parents and seeks the aid of the law. It never seems to strike him that the cause lies within himself, as is shown immediately upon his removal elsewhere. Strict attention to work, sympathy with both children and people, honesty and integrity in dealings with them—these are the qualities that attract the children and compel the respect of the Maori. In short, we want the man as well as the teacher.

From various remarks made in the preceding paragraphs it will be seen that there is very great need of more visits of inspection for organization purposes in our schools. As far as the present arrangement for inspection work go I can only express the opinion that they are to me very unsatisfactory. The usual method of procedure is for the teacher to take some ordinary school work immediately before the examination work. The lessons are generally exceedingly hurried; the children and teacher alike have their thoughts concentrated upon the ordeal that is to follow. The Inspector cannot devote much time either to the lessons or to the most important part of his own work—the demonstration of methods for the assistance of the teacher. Nor, in many instances, does he see the school in its usual working-order. The conditions are more or less artificial. To overcome these objections it is, I think, advisable that every school shall be visited at least twice in the year—once for inspection and once for examination. And it would be a safeguard to the reputation of our schools, besides being a means of assistance to such teachers as require aid, were the inspection visit to be made without notice. I know of many schools where a day or even two or three days could be very profitably spent in demonstrating to the teachers simpler and easier methods of teaching. In the case of teachers newly appointed to the charge of schools, much trouble could be saved them were they able to take advantage of the presence of an Inspector to get from him such information and assistance as they require in taking up work amongst Maori children.

Some photographs illustrating various phases of Native-school work accompany this report.

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WILLIAM W. BIRD.