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## **Exchange Teachers as “another Link in Binding the [British] Empire” in the Interwar Years**

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# Exchange Teachers as “another Link in Binding the [British] Empire” in the Interwar Years

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## Abstract

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This article focuses on “exchange teachers” from Great Britain plus Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, these countries constituting the white settler dominions of the British Empire. Participants in the League of Empire’s exchange scheme were mostly white middle class women elementary teachers. Reports of their work in newspapers and magazines show that they used whiteness as a strategy to differentiate the lands and peoples they encountered during their year-long overseas appointment, as well as their experiences of education in government school systems that were underpinned by race thinking. At the same time, they affirmed the British Empire and white settler national identities. Ultimately, exchange teachers were implicated in a transnational politics of whiteness binding the white settler dominions to each other and to the imperial centre in the interwar years.

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**Keywords:** exchange teachers, whiteness, British Empire



# **Profesores de Intercambio como “Otro Vínculo para Unir el Imperio [Británico]” en los Años de Entre Guerras**

Kay Whitehead

*Flinders University*

## **Resumen**

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Este artículo está enfocado en “profesores de intercambio” de Gran Bretaña, Australia, Canadá, Nueva Zelanda y Sudáfrica, países que constituyen las zonas pobladas por los colonos blancos del Imperio Británico. Los participantes en la Liga de Intercambio del Imperio fueron mayormente mujeres de raza blanca de clase media y profesoras de escuela. Artículos de su trabajo en periódicos y revistas son evidencia de que usaron su raza como estrategia para diferenciar las tierras y la gente que llegaron a conocer durante su año en el exterior, así como su experiencia de educación en el sistema escolar público que también estaba mantenido por una filosofía de raza. Al mismo tiempo, afirmaron la identidad nacional del colono blanco y el Imperio Británico. Al final, las profesoras de intercambio estaban implicadas en una política transnacional de la raza blanca ligando unas con otras las zonas colonizadas por los blancos así como con el centro imperial en los años entre las guerras.

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**Palabras Clave:** profesores de intercambio, raza blanca, Imperio Británico

In recent years, the circulation of people, ideas and information beyond national borders has attracted historians' attention in several English-speaking countries. Moving beyond the traditional concerns of politics and economics, "new" imperial histories are exploring reciprocal social and cultural relationships around the British Empire, and especially "the notion that the empire shaped the metropole itself" (Woollacott 2009, p. 20; Boucher, Carey & Ellinghaus 2009). Likewise, transnational historians seek to disrupt the binary of metropole and periphery and understand how ideas and practices are reconfigured in local contexts (Lake & Reynolds 2009; Buckner & Francis 2006). To these ends, there is an expanding body of research in the history of education which focuses on teachers' mobility across national borders in the early to mid-twentieth century. For example, Goodman (2002), Morris Matthews (2005) and Whitehead (2010) have explored the lives and work of New Zealand and British women university graduates who left their home countries to teach in wealthy corporate schools around the British Empire on short-term contracts. Zimmerman's (2006) focus is American teachers who travelled abroad in the twentieth century. Governments and other organisations also recruited overseas teachers to supplement local workforces: During the Boer War, for example, three hundred Canadian, New Zealand and Australian women teachers were employed in the South African War concentration camps (Reidi, 2005). And a large cohort of British teachers immigrated to the province of Saskatchewan in Canada in the interwar years (Barber 2006). Whatever the contexts in which they lived and worked, teachers were implicated in the transfer of knowledge across national borders.

This article focuses on a small but steady stream of "exchange teachers" who moved among the white settler dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and Great Britain during this period. Opting for temporary posts overseas, exchange teachers lived and worked in another country for one year while retaining their permanent positions at home. Their salaries were also paid by their home country's employer (*Register*, 17 July 1925, p. 8). The first section of the article provides a profile of teachers who joined the League of Empire's exchange scheme. Beginning with British teachers who chose to work in the white settler dominions, the following sections examine teachers' perspectives of their overseas posts as

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featured in newspapers and magazines. In these texts exchange teachers frequently commented on the lands and people they encountered during their year abroad as well as their experiences of education. Lastly, the article assesses the benefits of the League of Empire scheme as nominated by its advocates and the exchange teachers themselves.

##### **“One of the Rank and File of his [sic] Profession”**

Beginning in the early twentieth century, several organisations sponsored schemes to enable teachers to work overseas for various periods. The International Federation of University Women arranged a few exchanges in the 1920s (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1930, p. 6) and the English Speaking Union concentrated on exchanges between British and American secondary school teachers. From its base in London, the English Speaking Union also managed several scholarship programs which enabled teachers to spend short terms overseas (*Register*, 9 May 1925, p. 5). Also based in London, the League of Empire exchange teacher program had a broader remit. Beginning in 1907, the League of Empire cooperated with government school systems in many provinces and states of the self-governing white settler dominions of Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia to arrange one-year exchanges. Between 1919 and 1934, more than 2,000 British and white-settler dominions teachers took advantage of the scheme (*League of Empire*, 1934, p. 7). The exchanges were not distributed evenly. Canada was the most popular destination for British teachers, followed by South Africa (*Daily News*, 3 April 1923, p. 5). As far as Australia and New Zealand were concerned, “the distance of our Commonwealth from the old country is an obstacle in the way of extensive exchange of teachers” (*Register*, 9 May 1925, p. 5). Nevertheless, Australians and New Zealanders also favoured exchanges with British teachers and there were far fewer exchanges between the dominions. In the 1920s, for example, thirty-two New Zealand teachers went to Great Britain, twenty-six to Canada, three to South Africa and one to Australia (*Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 10).

As far as exchange teachers' demographic profiles were concerned, the scheme was restricted to teachers between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, and attracted the "rank and file of his [sic] profession" (*Auckland Star*, 19 September 1933). Given the specialist nature of secondary and technical teachers' work, it was difficult to match them with a colleague overseas, so the majority of exchange teachers came from elementary schools (*Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 10). Furthermore, they were classroom teachers rather than head teachers. A New Zealand reporter opined, "this is probably because most head teachers are married men, their family responsibilities making it difficult for them to go abroad" (*Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 10). Women comprised ninety-five per cent of exchange teachers in the interwar years (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 7). According to one commentator, the preponderance of women over men "seemed to point to a somewhat lack of initiative and spirit of adventure" on the men's part (*Evening Post*, 19 July 1935, p. 6). Long waiting lists of women teachers who were "most eager for exchange" (*Evening Post*, 19 July 1935, p. 6) indicated that there was no lack of initiative among them. Furthermore, marriage bars in most jurisdictions meant that they were likely to be single. The typical exchange teacher was thus a mature, single, woman elementary school teacher.

Women elementary teachers mostly occupied subordinate positions in the gendered hierarchies of school systems across the British Empire and they seem to be unlikely candidates for involvement in transnational knowledge transfer. However, they were also white and middle class, and thus they occupied relatively powerful positions in societies and classrooms that were marked by racial as well as class and gender inequalities. "The Commonwealth of Australia had declared its racial identity at its inauguration in 1901" with the White Australia policy (*Lake & Reynolds* 2009, p. 315). White Canada and white New Zealand had followed suit by the interwar years (*Belich*, 2001, p. 224). In South Africa, "white racial fears were fuelled anew when the census of 1920 showed African population growth outstripping that of the European community" (*Lake & Reynolds* 2009, p. 326). Although comprising a largely black population, South Africa claimed solidarity as white settler dominion with New Zealand, Canada and Australia. All were self-governing and all were developing their national

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identities hand-in-hand with their commitments to the British Empire. The imperial centre, Great Britain, was assumed to be white as well, with whiteness comprising not only physical racial traits but also social and cultural practices and an “inherent association with power and privilege” (Boucher, Carey & Ellinghaus, 2009, p. 3). In this article, I argue that wherever they were located, at home or abroad, exchange teachers were implicated in a transnational politics of whiteness.

The next section of this paper will focus on British exchange teachers who travelled to the dominions. Then I will proceed to exchanges within the dominions, followed by dominions exchange teachers in the imperial centre. In all cases, exchange teachers carried assumptions of both home and their destinations with them to their overseas posts. As they crisscrossed the British Empire, “whiteness [also] travelled both discursively and materially, its meaning was always reconfigured in these circulations” (Boucher, Carey & Ellinghaus 2009, p. 4).

### **“From the Beginning I did not Feel a Stranger” in the Dominions**

British exchange teachers who travelled to Canada mostly remained in the same school for the duration of their stay, and thus had a limited exposure to school systems. Those who were located in Australia and New Zealand experienced at least two schools over the twelve month period and were provided with opportunities to observe several more educational institutions (*Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 10). Additionally, British teachers often encountered racial difference en route to Australia and New Zealand in various ports of call. One teacher claimed that “the travel to and fro is of infinite value ... now such places which previously were mere word pictures are realities” (League of Empire, 1934, p. 36). In 1929 Miss O’Reilly reported on the “general dirt and grime of the milk boys” in Malta and being surrounded by “picturesque ragamuffins in boats” desperately trying to make a sale at Port Said (*Avery Hill Reporter*, July 1929, p. 13). O’Reilly’s race thinking was evident in the way she cast these children as non-white, unkempt, unclean, unschooled and untrustworthy.

Upon arrival in the dominions, British exchange teachers described “places of greater civilization, of order, cleanliness and a truly good quality of life” (Heron, 2007, p. 34). According to Miss Holmes, New Zealand was



a land of “undulating grazing country” with “farms dotted about” (*Avery Hill Reporter*, January 1929, pp. 16-17). Another teacher’s first impressions of Canada were encapsulated in two words, “space” and “health” (*Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher’s Chronicle*, 23 April 1926, p. 734). For Miss Harvey, Australia was the “grandest country” with “great gum trees and wildflowers of every conceivable shape and colour”. The nomenclature of Harvey’s rural destination, “Noman’s Lake”, denied the existence of Indigenous Australians. Alighting from the train, she soon unearthed two Englishmen who had left “the old country” many years before to become successful farmers, thereby confirming white superiority and entitlement to the land (*Avery Hill Reporter*, July 1931, pp. 12-13; Swain, Hillel & Sweeney 2009, p. 90). In effect, British exchange teachers imagined and mostly experienced the dominions as white countries in the interwar years. Assuming a shared racial heritage, exchange teachers portrayed the people as kind and hospitable (*Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher’s Chronicle*, 23 Oct 1925, p. 58) and “capable and independent”, the women in New Zealand being “extraordinarily” so (*Avery Hill Reporter*, January 1929, pp. 16-17). In turn, they were welcomed into rural white settler communities as “representatives of the heart of the Empire” (*Wodonga and Towong Sentinel*, 30 August 1928, p. 3). Mary Cox’s shared imperial loyalties with her dominions counterparts meant “that from the beginning I did not feel a stranger” (*Woman Teacher*, 18 May 1923, p. 254). Miss Townsend quickly “won the affection of the children, helped the Mothers Club considerably and made herself invaluable to the school” (*Wodonga and Towong Sentinel*, 30 August 1928, p. 3). Occasionally, however, there were problems. The “alleged inefficiency” of two British exchange teachers was raised by parents, but press reports concluded that most exchange teachers “adapted themselves very well to New Zealand conditions” (*Evening Post*, 10 February 1938, p. 10).

For some exchange teachers, the children of the white settler dominions exemplified the successes of British colonisation. Australian, New Zealand and Canadian children were high spirited, sturdy (*Avery Hill Reporter*, January 1929, pp. 16-17) and particularly enthusiastic about sport (*Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher’s Chronicle*, 23 October 1925, p. 58). Mr Hall described Australian schoolboys as “useful, practical and

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trustworthy. No London children could do things like these. In fact, the teacher did not allow them out of his sight” (*Camperdown Chronicle*, 11 October 1927, p. 3). Miss Butler claimed that “New Zealand children were better brought up and worked better than London children. London parents took no interest in education” (*Evening Post*, 11 September 1933). Nevertheless, some exchange teachers were unable to sustain the myth of white countries and their race thinking came to the fore. Hilda Harrison “admit[ted] I felt strange at first when I was confronted with a class of children of all nationalities, including quite a large proportion of coloured children” (*Bulletin*, November 1927, p. 7) in Canada. New Zealand had established a separate “Native School System” in 1867 “to inculcate European ideas and habits among the Maoris” (Quoted in Belich 2001, p. 203). Miss C. was posted to a “remote Maori school” and seemed to position herself as an anthropologist rather than a teacher, “taking with her a Maori grammar and has promised to collect songs and dances” (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 32). Australian and Canadian Indigenous people had mostly been confined to missions and thus were unlikely to be attending the government schools to which exchange teachers were appointed. All of these dominions were closed to the migration of non-white people, thereby consolidating their reputations as white settler nations. This did not mean that race thinking did not infiltrate classrooms and influence education in the interwar era.

With some exceptions, British exchange teachers were impressed with the spacious school buildings and playing fields, these being further evidence of civilised and progressive white societies. They also appreciated the “many opportunities for studying the school system” (*Northern Star*, 16 November 1929, p. 13) as they moved from school to school in Australia and New Zealand, and took advantage of observation days. Some saw Australian and New Zealand school systems as “fundamentally different from England” in that they were “directly controlled by the government” (*Northern Star*, 16 November 1929, p. 13). According to Mr Outrin, “centralization of authority made for greater uniformity and much more effective work in the rural districts of New Zealand” (*Auckland Star*, 19 September 1933). The one-room rural school was also a prominent feature of Australian education and British teachers were “impressed with the

wonderful abilities of the isolated teachers in carrying out their work” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 July 1924, p. 8). It was taken for granted that that work was undertaken in white communities from which Indigenous families were excluded.

Canada, Australia and New Zealand were mostly seen to have uniform programs of instruction across government schools. The so-called “Teacher’s Bible” (*Northern Star*, 16 November 1929, p. 13) in Australia impressed one exchange teacher as did the comprehensive “program of studies” and textbooks in every Canadian school (*Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher’s Chronicle*, 5 February 1926, p. 217). Wherever they were located in the white settler dominions, British exchange teachers worked in school systems and with curriculum and textbooks that were inflected with race thinking. The privileging of whiteness was also apparent in children’s literature (Swain, Hillel & Sweeney 2009, p. 85) and in the Empire celebrations which “thrilled and impressed” an exchange teacher in Canada (*Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher’s Chronicle*, 25 June 1926, p. 1012). In 1926 “a new history curriculum [in New Zealand] stressed race and Empire even more than the old” (Belich, 2001, p. 118). If mentioned at all, Indigenous people were located in geography lessons and “connected to the natural world of flora and fauna rather than the social and cultural worlds” (Sharp, 2013, p. 182). They were also likely to be represented as primitive, savage and dying races (von Heyking 2006). To these understandings, British exchange teachers added their “first-hand knowledge ... of countries abroad” (*League of Empire*, 1934, p. 27) and they were frequently co-opted to teach Geography to several classes. Miss Heathcote went a step further and “generously donated a filmstrip containing historical and geographical scenes, views of ports of call on the Suez route to Australia and glimpses of New Zealand” (*Northern Star*, 14 August 1937, p. 11). Notwithstanding her trenchant criticism of domestic science facilities in Australia, Miss Rothery introduced some new ideas to local teachers (*Daily News*, 27 July 1935, p. 6) and Miss Little instructed teachers in physical culture (*Barrier Miner*, 10 August 1937, p. 1). Ultimately, the relative lack of critique from British exchange teachers about programs of instruction points to an essential sameness rather than radical difference between the world views that

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underpinned British and dominions school systems, curriculum and textbooks.

Overall, the many reports from and about British exchange teachers simultaneously reinforced white settlers' superiority and success in the dominions and the "might and right" (Swain, Hillel & Sweeney 2009, p. 85) of the British Empire. Furthermore, their world views were in keeping with the curriculum and textbooks in dominions school systems. If this was the case when British teachers travelled to the white settler dominions, what was the situation when South African, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian teachers exchanged with each other?

### **"Kids are Kids wherever they Are" in the Dominions**

Whatever their origins, exchange teachers were quickly inducted into their overseas posts. The Overseas Education League in Winnipeg, Canada, welcomed exchange teachers and "provided most generous hospitality" to new arrivals (*Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 10). The local branch of the League of Empire performed the same service in South Australia (*The Mail*, 15 December 1928, p. 7). Teachers unions also featured prominently as hosts, the South African Teachers Association (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 24) being a case in point. In Western Australia, the teachers union organised "a pleasurable afternoon tea" to welcome British and New Zealand exchange teachers, "tea being served on a long table with exquisite white linen cloths, and vases of carnations, roses and maidenhair fern" (*West Australian*, 30 March 1936, p. 9). In 1934, the Women Teachers Association in New Zealand hosted an afternoon tea for British, Canadian and South African exchange teachers (*Evening Post*, 20 March 1934, p. 10). Arranging social meetings and weekend excursions for overseas visitors (*Northern Star*, 20 July 1929, p. 7) were important acts of imperial and white solidarity.

Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and South African teachers represented each other's countries as modern civilised nations. In this respect they had much in common with British exchange teachers in the dominions. However, their reports were also underpinned by a sense that the dominions were mostly on equal footing with each other. Subtle differences in language and customs were identified by two Australian exchange teachers in Canada: "The traffic runs on the wrong side of the road

according to Australian laws, and who ever heard of a tram being called a street car?” (*Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh*, 2 February 1939, p. 4). Coming from Australia, Ethel Mitchell nominated New Zealand as the “workers’ paradise” but noted that clothes and living accommodation were expensive than her home country (*The Mail*, 9 March 1940, p. 11). Canadian exchange teachers were impressed by New Zealand’s government-owned railway system (*Evening Post*, 14 June 1928). South African exchange teachers and those who went to South Africa rarely acknowledged that their lives and work were underpinned by black domestic labour. In an implicit comparison however, South African Margaret Smith stated that Australian women’s “hospitality was all the more striking ... because of the absence of domestic help” (*Western Mail*, 8 July 1948, p. 37).

It was climatic differences rather than people that drew comment from exchange teachers. Grace Joyce claimed that her interest in New Zealand had been aroused years beforehand by her Canadian “public school Geography text book” but it did not prepare her for New Zealanders’ living conditions:

The forest is sub-tropical but the climate isn’t – at least it is not my idea of a sub-tropical climate. Aside from the penetrating dampness of autumn, winter and spring: it was comparatively comfortable outside, but inside – well Canadians long to put on an extra coat rather than take one off. Fireplaces are supposed to heat rooms (*Educational Courier*, 9 December 1938, pp. 4-5).

Joyce was used to Canada’s extremely cold winters but modern Canadian homes had central heating. She had expected similar home comforts in an equivalent white settler dominion. Australian exchange teachers had some difficulty acclimatising to Canadian winters, and snow at Christmas was deemed “not natural” (*Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh*, 2 February 1939, p. 4). In contrast Miss Louis from New Zealand gave “a vivid description of her stay in Sydney [Australia] during the heat wave” (*Evening Post*, 11 March 1940, p. 14).

For the most part, dominions exchange teachers conceptualised each other’s students as essentially the same. “Kids are kids wherever they are”, claimed two Australian teachers in Canada (*Gilgandra Weekly and*

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*Castlereagh*, 2 February 1939, p. 4). This was not so for a New Zealand teacher in Canada: “Of my forty-two girls, two only are of British birth, the rest being Jews, Russians, Poles and Ruthenians. One third of my girls do not hear any English spoken at home” (*Hawera and Normandy Star*, 30 March 1922, p. 7). Australian Marjorie Tevellin was posted to a “much coveted” New Zealand school but she accepted opportunities to observe “different” schools. “With others I have been to a Maori school at Huntley ... and special classes for mentally deficient children” (*Examiner*, 8 August 1937, p. 9). Exchange teachers who travelled to Australia taught in white settler government schools as did the small numbers of exchange teachers who went to South Africa. When South African exchange teacher, Mr de Waal, addressed an Australian audience, he stated that his home town “was the centre for a population of about 10,000 whites and 50,000 natives” (*Northern Star*, 22 June 1938, p. 9). He sustained the image of a white South Africa by completely ignoring the lives, work and education of the majority black population in his speech. In essence, dominions exchange teachers were just as eager as British exchange teachers to homogenise the children they taught.

As far as school systems and infrastructure were concerned, there were plenty of comparisons but little consensus among dominions exchange teachers. Coming from Canada, Luella Derbecker stated that the New Zealand “system of education is admirable” (*Evening Post*, 14 June 1926) whereas her compatriot thought New Zealand schools were “poorly equipped” and deficient in “art and literature” (*Auckland Star*, 5 November 1938). Mr Harrison argued that “South African schools were advanced beyond New Zealand” (*New Zealand Herald*, 18 August 1921, p. 6) but a South African exchange teacher intended to “take back with me from New Zealand ... the idea of the open-air school” (*Evening Post*, 8 June 1928, p. 11). There was very little discussion of teaching programs, suggesting again that they were similar across the white settler dominions. However, dominions exchange teachers did comment on the gendered division of labour and its inequalities, and found that they had much in common. Men managed and women taught in all government school systems. Marjorie Tevellin noted that the New Zealand headmaster sat in his study and issued instructions to all classrooms via a “school broadcasting apparatus”

(*Examiner*, 8 August 1937, p. 9). Mr Harrison reported that South African women teachers were only paid fifty per cent of a male teacher's salary: "A similar proposal would be met with much opposition here in New Zealand" (*New Zealand Herald*, 18 August 1921, p. 6). Canadian, Grace Joyce, stated that "I was very much amused when I found that one of the "bones of contention" among the [New Zealand] teachers was "should men receive a higher salary than women?" The answers were the same as Ontario" (*Educational Courier*, 9 December 1938, pp. 4-5). When it came to women teachers' subordinate positions in the teaching workforce, the issues were definitely transnational.

In essence, dominions teachers' discussions of their overseas posts resonated with British exchange teachers. The dominions were deemed modern and progressive and white settlers' entitlement to the land was taken for granted. They did not disrupt "the spread of whiteness as a transnational form of racial identification" (Lake & Reynolds 2009, p. 3). Although exchange teachers observed subtle differences in customs and education, for example, there seemed to be "an instinctive solidarity" (Lake & Reynolds 2009, p. 3) binding white middle class teachers from Australia, South Africa, Canada and New Zealand. Simonelli (2009, p. 1) argues that "people wanted to see the empire achieve measures of unity in the interwar era". Aside from the gendered division of teaching labour, exchange teachers positioned each other's nations as egalitarian, and imperial loyalties did not feature prominently in their discussions. It was a different matter when dominions exchange teachers travelled to the imperial centre to work for one year.

### **"Merely an Ordinary Person" in the Imperial Centre**

Working in London in 1921, Miss Evans, an Australian exchange teacher, proclaimed "it is good to find one's self in the hub of the universe, in the core of our Empire" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 1921, p. 4). And from its London base the League of Empire did as much as it could to reinforce the assumption that Great Britain was the centre of knowledge, culture and history. Lectures, weekend visits to historic sites, along with holidays on the Continent were organised for dominions exchange teachers (*The Times*, 9 February 1924, p. 7). Thus the British history and culture



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which held a privileged place in dominions' school textbooks "became a reality" (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 25) for exchange teachers. The highlights of Miss Hazlett's year were Westminster Abbey "which really belonged to her" now, a field of bluebells, and an "Albert Hall concert, with the King and Queen present" (*Evening Post*, 19 July 1934, p. 4). There were no doubts about exchange teachers' imperial loyalties.

Social life aside, the majority of dominions exchange teachers worked in London County Council (LCC) schools and were allocated to the "supply staff" which meant that they replaced absent teachers. In 1934, Miss Marshall from Australia "taught at over fifty schools for periods extending from half a day to three months" (*West Australian*, 24 October 1934, p. 4). Two New Zealand teachers' tallies were fourteen schools (*Oamaru Herald*, 17 March 1916, p. 1) and twenty-two schools respectively (*Evening Post*, 30 September 1926). Dominions teachers were thus afforded a "very wide experience indeed" (*Daily News*, 3 April 1923, p. 5). Arriving from New Zealand, Miss Spence was "astounded" by the "varied types of schools: church schools, provided schools ... nursery schools" in London (*Evening Post*, 8 July 1936). She remarked on the disparity between schools in the poorer and well-to-do parts of the city, exemplified by the nursery classes in very poor areas where classes of 50 children aged 3-5 were common. Miss Lindsay also reported that "social distinctions were very clearly marked" (*Oamaru Herald*, 17 March 1916, p. 1). Upon her arrival from Australia, Miss Marshall's first appointment was to a "slum school". Next was a "Church school" and she stated, "it was just like going to Paradise" (*West Australian*, 24 October 1934, p. 4). Nevertheless, Marshall and her dominions colleagues were destined to spend most of their year in "London's great slum areas" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 1921, p. 4).

Dominions exchange teachers regarded the imperial centre as uniformly white but soon discovered that children in the slum schools "were so different from the New Zealand children that they cannot be compared: they can only be contrasted" (*Colonist*, 23 February 1916, p. 2). An Australian exchange teacher, Miss Farr, reported that the "East End school children were mostly of Jewish and foreign extraction"; some were "withered little mites" (*Northern Star*, 12 April 1924, p. 9). Miss Marshall found slum



children to be “very shrewd little people” but “not ... up to the intellectual standard of others of their age” (*West Australian*, 24 October 1934, p. 4). Miss Caskey from New Zealand agreed (*Colonist*, 23 February 1916, p. 2) as did Miss Farr: “Although East End children were smart at dodging motor buses and policemen, the gaps in their general knowledge are much wider than can possibly be imagined” (*Northern Star*, 12 April 1924, p. 9).

If slum children were “uncivilised, lower class and non-European” (Heron, 2007, p. 29) then their parents and their crowded living conditions were even more so. Miss Caskey stated that “there are too many bread-and-butter children in London, while every New Zealand child gets a good dinner” (*Colonist*, 23 February 1916, p. 2). Miss Spence from New Zealand found that the “mothers all went to work” leaving teachers in charge of very young children (*Evening Post*, 8 July 1936). Coming from Canada, Mina Burns was “sorry to see their few belongings – some of these little garments would barely stand a wash” (*Bulletin*, March 1927, p. 14). As Grosvenor and Hall (2012, p. 15) argue, “implicit connections were made between child deprivation, family size and parental neglect”. Whereas British exchange teachers mostly shared the world views of white settler dominions communities in which they worked, their counterparts in the imperial centre were confronted by cultural difference, which they reported as deficit, not only among students but also their families and communities.

From dominions exchange teachers’ perspectives, the environment and work in LCC schools stood in stark contrast to the surroundings inhabited by slum children. Most exchange teachers considered that LCC school buildings were “excellent” and “splendidly equipped” (*Northern Star*, 12 April 1924, p. 9). Miss Evans wrote, “to get out of the slum nearby and to walk into the atmosphere of the school is like meeting an oasis in the desert” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 1921, p. 4). Furthermore, exchange teachers were full of praise for the focus on children’s health and cleanliness in slum schools, these constituting key elements of whiteness. Indeed, “particular care” was taken “to see that the children were clean” (*Register*, 27 July 1923, p. 10). Additionally, exchange teachers were impressed that it was not only the LCC, but also “the richer people of Great Britain were taking an interest in the education of the poorer classes” (*Register*, 27 July 1923, p. 10). With support from wealthy philanthropists, milk was served to

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“delicate pupils” and “3,500 pupils were supplied with breakfast and dinner daily” (*Evening Post*, 8 July 1936) in the Docks district. After observing the extensive preparation to take some “poor little girls” to the seaside for a vacation, Canadian Mina Burns stated, “as I returned to my classroom I could but feel grateful that in my country such conditions did not exist and such excursions were not necessary” (*Bulletin*, March 1927, p. 14). Miss Sway was relieved that there was “no need for “care committees” in New Zealand” (*Colonist*, 23 February 1916, p. 2). And Australian, Miss Evans claimed that she was drawing inspiration from the mistakes of the past and determined that she would “try to help save our part of the world from ever having the same social problems” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 1921, p. 4). In essence, dominions exchange teachers were keen to report that white citizens of the imperial centre were making every effort to rescue slum children, thereby “affirming the Empire and the privilege implicit in whiteness” (Swain, Hillel & Sweeney 2009, p. 85). At the same time, exchange teachers were confirming their national identities as middle class white South Africans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders of a cleaner, progressive New World.

When it came to comparing school systems, dominions exchange teachers agreed that the English system was “much freer” (*West Australian*, 24 October 1934, p. 4). Mr Mercer argued that “the London teacher is not bound down by a code nor by any stereotyped form or method of teaching this that, or the other branch or subject” (*Daily News*, 3 April 1923, p. 5). Coming from South Africa, Gladys Schmidt “soon felt quite at home with the routine” and also the syllabus (*Recorder*, 2 May 1927, p. 2). Australian Florence Blake was ambivalent about the English system, claiming that teachers tended to over-emphasise some subjects (*Register*, 27 July 1923, p. 10) but Canadian Mina Burns applauded “the greater use of physical training in schools because it remedied some of the “defects” in slum children: “In one school all of the flat-footed, round-shouldered, drooping shouldered and otherwise lop-sided pupils were taken to the roof each morning ... and given a half hour of remedial drill” (*Bulletin*, March 1927, p. 14). Miss Farr thought that the “essential subjects” of reading writing and arithmetic “were equal to Australian schools” but she was scathing about History and Geography, both of which were primarily taught from textbooks and resulted

in “very mechanical lessons ... much below our standards” (*Northern Star*, 12 April 1924, p. 9). That was not the only problem. According to one critic, geography textbooks in English schools were “poor quality”, “many years out of date and necessarily give a misleading impression of a most progressive continent”, namely Australia and New Zealand (*Evening Post*, 25 May 1928). To address this problem, Geography lessons were “generally handed over” to the exchange teachers (*Daily News*, 3 April 1923, p. 5). Indeed, exchange teachers were called upon “to act as excellent propaganda agents for their various states and provinces” (*West Australian*, 29 January 1924, p. 8), a role that was simultaneously empowering and disempowering.

In 1926, Mr Melody borrowed lantern slides from the New Zealand High Commissioner’s department in London and gave an average of two lectures a week to school children and other organisations (*Evening Post*, 16 March 1926). Mr Reedy estimated that he “addressed no fewer than 3,000 children on the subject of Australia and her natural benefits – but in the human sense – her industries and her people. He found an amazing ignorance among both pupils and teachers regarding Australia’s climate” (*West Australian*, 29 January 1924, p. 8). Like other teachers he assumed that all students would be “roused to attention on hearing of Australia, Canada or South Africa from a teacher who had personal knowledge of the country” (*Register*, 9 February 1925, p. 5). His race thinking came to the fore when he recalled “an amusing instance which rightly or wrongly is always associated with the Jews”. After being told all about “Australian animals, flowers, plants and games” one “fidgety” Hebrew boy only wanted to know “what kind of money do they use in Australia?” While Reedy viewed this particular incident as amusing, dominions exchange teachers “became painfully conscious of their whiteness” (Lake & Reynolds 2009, p. 1) when confronted by the race thinking in British textbooks and among British teachers and students. Upon her arrival in England, Gladys Schmidt discovered that some of the students “thought that all of the people in South Africa were black” and that “I was expected to be a black woman” (*Recorder*, 2 May 1927, p. 2). The same applied to an Australian exchange teacher in 1938 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1938, p. 5). Demonstrating that whiteness was crucial to Australian identity, Miss Evans

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convinced many little ones that the children of Australia are not black .... People really do not know much about us in England, and one thing this interchange system will do, will be to show ... that Australia is alive and up to date (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 1921, p. 4).

It was one thing to teach about Indigenous peoples as a primitive race at home in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, it was quite another to be disempowered by the same race thinking in the imperial centre. Gladys Schmidt from South Africa soon showed that “I was merely an ordinary white person” (*Recorder*, 2 May 1927, p. 2). An exchange teacher from New Zealand restored the balance of power simply: When he gave lectures illustrated with lantern slides, he “cut out the Maoris of which they have heard so much and told the boys about the schools and industries and general conditions” (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 33). It seemed that at least some exchange teachers from the white settler dominions spent much of their year reassuring the imperial centre that their corner of the British Empire was indeed, white, as well as modern and progressive.

### **“Cementing Ties in a Quiet, Unobtrusive ... Effective Way”**

In a report to the League of Empire in 1934, the LCC stated that “there is good ground for believing that the operation of the interchange scheme has been of great benefit on both sides, not only to the individual teachers who have acquired this additional experience, but to schools and the educational system generally” (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 25). The League of Empire, its supporters, administrators in the various government school systems, and the exchange teachers articulated a range of benefits of the exchange scheme in the interwar years.

Firstly, there was “ample evidence of great gain to the school children” (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 8) from contact with exchange teachers. The Chairman of the League of Empire stated, “during the actual term of exchange, the teacher is, for the pupils, a living representative from parts of the world otherwise known to them only by hearsay, and a means of obtaining first-hand information” (*Times*, 2 July 1938, p. 5). This meant that teachers carried an “immense responsibility for what they put into students’ minds” (*Examiner*, 2 July 1938, p. 5) but they also had “greater

opportunities” than other occupations to influence “the citizen of tomorrow”. As an Australian exchange teacher stated, “the politician, the clergyman and the tourist do not reach so vast an audience” (*Daily News*, 3 April 1923, p. 5). Secondly, exchange teachers deployed “their home knowledge to enliven their teaching” in their overseas posts (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 27). Some introduced new ideas and methods to their colleagues in host schools and most exchange teachers were co-opted into teaching geography, thereby temporarily replacing inaccurate textbooks in both Britain and the dominions. Thirdly, exchange teachers were frequently called upon as guest speakers to teachers associations and community groups, thereby sharing their home knowledge well beyond the classrooms in which they taught. Although both men and women exchange teachers contributed in this way, women teachers were seen to “cultivate a warm human understanding of the conditions, the problems and the characteristics of the other” (*Mercury*, 26 May 1923, p. 14).

The benefits accruing to exchange teachers were both personal and professional. The cumulative experience of the year overseas was “a means of obtaining a liberal education” and essential “to those whose life’s work is to mould the character of future citizens” (*Register*, 9 May 1925, p. 5). One Australian exchange teacher claimed that “the benefits of the system lay more in the travel and the experience of life, and peoples involved in that travel, than in the knowledge acquired through a year’s teaching in the schools of another country” (*West Australian*, 29 January 1924, p. 8). This attitude worried an Australian administrator who thought that exchange teachers might become dissatisfied with their home situation (*Courier-Mail*, 10 October 1934, p. 15). Another cautioned that exchange teachers might go overseas “merely for a holiday” (*Ashburton Guardian*, 2 October 1920, p. 5). There was also the potential that women might marry, leave the profession and remain overseas (*Timaru Herald*, 13 August 1913, p. 9). This became the case with Marjorie Tevellin from Australia (*Examiner*, 17 May 1938, p. 3). However, dissenting voices were rare and the League of Empire’s perspective held sway

Of the advantage of the Scheme to teachers professionally there can be no doubt. Their interchange year provides opportunity for teaching under

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different systems, handling a different type of child and living under different conditions and surroundings; they also gain much from the travel necessarily involved (or at times voluntarily undertaken), and the contact thus gained with the outside world (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 8).

When they returned from their overseas posts, exchange teachers “brought back with them things of value to their society” (*Evening Post*, 19 July 1935, p. 15). Children at home were treated to new knowledge and ideas, and so benefited from the exchange teacher’s liberal education. Likewise, colleagues were thought to “profit by their example” (*Argus*, 28 March 1916, p. 5). In addition, exchange teachers submitted reports of their year overseas, from which the Education Department in New Zealand “derived much valuable information”, indeed “first-hand information secured by these exchange teachers” (*Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 10). However, an Australian government official “did not think it was much value to the State” and “he could not find much merit in it as a means of improving the teaching service” (*Courier-Mail*, 10 October 1934, p. 15). His standpoint was not shared in a report about women exchange teachers: “Each teacher returning from her year of new experiences will pass on to an ever-widening circle the knowledge she has gained of other countries and other peoples” (*New Zealand Herald*, 5 May 1923, p. 4).

Superseding the advantages to children, teachers, local communities and school systems, was the claim that “the exchange system is proving another link in binding the Empire” (*Brisbane Courier*, 7 May 1930, p. 14). Indeed, exchange teachers were “cementing Empire ties in a quiet, unobtrusive, but withal, effective way” (*League of Empire* 1934, p. 31). There were frequent references to exchange teachers as “apostles and true missionaries of education in the Commonwealth of Nations in the interwar years” (E.g. *Evening Post*, 1 June 1927, p. 10; *Examiner*, 2 July 1938, p. 5). A more extravagant claim for the exchange scheme was that “it is on the schoolmaster, more than anyone else that the common knowledge of the Empire depends” (*Evening Post*, 20 July 1925, p. 4). There were also specific “comments on the part played by women [exchange teachers] in the strengthening of the Empire’s ideals” (*Mercury*, 26 May 1923, p. 14). Addressing the Imperial Education Conference in 1924, the Duke of York proposed that “instead of teaching primarily for the State, [exchange

teachers] will be working for the Empire”. He concluded “there is no better way of consolidating the unity of the Empire than by working out together the problems of education” (*Register*, 13 August 1924, p. 5). Thus teachers’ mobility across national borders was deemed to have transnational benefits: “Not only is the teacher helped to a broader outlook, but silently and surely through the exchange of teachers the Empire is being drawn together in the bonds of affections and better understanding” (*The Times*, 19 February 1924, p. 7).

It was not only exchange teachers who were cementing Empire ties and facilitating the transnational circulation of knowledge through the white settler dominions and imperial centre, but also newspapers and magazines which reported their activities and their perceptions. The digitised newspaper collections from the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand have constituted the primary sources for this article, along with some British and Canadian newspapers and magazines. Together, these texts show that race thinking underpinned the school systems in which exchange teachers taught at home and abroad. Exchange teachers used whiteness as a strategy to differentiate students and the communities in which they worked; they upheld white settler dominance and entitlement to the land in the dominions; and they expressed their loyalty to the British Empire. Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and South African exchange teachers simultaneously affirmed their national identities. Correspondents, journalists and editors of the newspapers and magazines played an additional role in consolidating the Empire: Articles from one newspaper were often paraphrased or reprinted in another, with or without acknowledging the original source. In so doing, newspapers intensified and extended the transnational circulation of knowledge about and by exchange teachers. In one case, an interview with a South African exchange teacher, Gladys Schmidt, about her work in England was published in an Australian rural newspaper. Little did Schmidt know that when she constructed her self as “an ordinary white person” in London, she would be helping to shape public opinion and consolidating whiteness in the little township of Port Pirie, Australia (*Recorder*, 2 May 1927, p. 2).



## Conclusion

Lake and Reynolds (2009, p. 330) argue that “race thinking pervaded the intellectual life of Western Europe, North America and the British Dominions” in the interwar years. The same must be said of exchange teachers, be they British, South African, Canadian, New Zealanders or Australian, who simultaneously asserted white settlers’ superiority and success in the dominions and the legitimacy of the British Empire. Operating from relatively privileged positions, exchange teachers’ race thinking was revealed in their work, in their interactions with local communities and in the press. Nevertheless, some middle class white teachers discovered that power did not always lie with them, and that children were also capable of deploying race thinking. Just as exchange teachers attempted to shape students’ thinking in geography lessons, history lessons and many more besides, they also learnt a lesson or two about power. Finally, their ideas and practices were reported and repeated in the mass media in and around the white settler dominions and the imperial centre. And so it was that the ordinary rank and file of the teaching profession, women more so than men, were active participants in the transnational circulation of knowledge about lands and peoples, children and education, nations and Empire, and whiteness, in the interwar years.

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