

ALMOST HALF A LIFETIME

A PERSONAL VIEW

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INTRODUCTION

In speaking to you at this my last Union Conference I would like to tell you some of the things that happened in my 30 years with the kindergarten movement. Things that I lived through which, I think, have been of a significance greater than might have appeared at the time. I am not going to indulge in a reminiscent autobiography, but I would like to recount what happened to me and how, with hindsight, I see it now - to go backwards and forwards in time and give some sort of overview of the pattern of our joint work. If I can, to see it steadily, and see it whole.

Arrival

It all began over 30 years ago when, like many other young people who had been through the war, I wanted to go away, find the sun and experience a freedom that we in England hadn't known for six horrifying years. And it was to New Zealand that I came. I was invited to do so by letter from a person called Miss England who wrote to me and said that I could be appointed as a kindergarten teacher to a place in Wellington where a bed sitting room flat could be made available to me and that I could come as an assisted immigrant for £10. Who could refuse an offer like that? I came. That is condensing a rather longer story into a few sentences but you will notice that things were different then. I did not know who Miss England was, nor Miss Coulter who also wrote as "Secretary" but they obviously seemed to have the authority to accept my qualifications as a kindergarten teacher and to promise appointment to a paid job and some security of employment. That was the beginning.

I arrived in Wellington in January of 1949 and was met by Miss Coulter who took me, before I went to the kindergarten where I was to live, to the home of Mrs Eichelbaum for a welcome and a rest and I was most royally treated. You will realise that I did not know at all how these people fitted into my working life but I found that the natives were definitely friendly.

KINDERGARTEN TEACHING

The Programme for Children

And so to the kindergarten and, in a few more weeks, the beginning of the school year. I had been struck immediately by the small size of the kindergarten. After English nursery schools which catered for up to as many as 150 children, each in their own group with their own

teachers, their own equipment, storage, toilet facilities and with staff offices, common rooms, kitchen, a small homely building with 40 children who went home at midday, all mine to work with appeared the most relaxed and exciting situation. I wanted to try out programmes and ways of doing things that I had heard about and seen something of but had never been able to carry through because I hadn't the responsibility. So, when my assistant arrived and the two students who had been assigned to the kindergarten, we sat down on the day before the children came and talked about the programme. I told them I wanted to run a programme in which the children were not divided into separate groups but where the equipment was set out into planned groups, so that the children could go from one activity to another as they pleased. I asked them if they would be happy to try this way of working; they said they would; they made suggestions about how we could manage morning tea or story groups or music and then we all set to and moved the furniture and equipment, drew up a plan of supervision - who was to do what, when and where (one plan for each of us and one up on the wall of each playroom) and we planned a simple set of records so that we could see, at the end of each week, the activity pattern of each child.

Orthodoxy

You see, it had never occurred to me that, as head teacher, anyone other than I had the final say in what sort of programme I ran and how it was managed. I did what I believed to be in the best interests of the children with what the staffing, the equipment and the facilities allowed. Together with my assistant, the students and the parent helpers - who, in 1949, let it be said, were already in the habit of being part of the programme - we planned and we recorded. We also changed the programme as our work developed. I would never say that all was sweetness and light from that day on. It wasn't. I made mistakes. We had parents concerned that the children weren't doing anything - just playing. We had training staff anxious that the students might not get experience in this or that. We had visitors very doubtful about a lack of routine, and I know now - which I didn't know then - that the word was spreading through the students to my other teacher colleagues who were very resentful that this foreign imported teacher was being put in the limelight for doing things that appeared heresy to them and that their confidence was being undermined.

I wonder if you can imagine how shocked I was during the latter part of that year at an association staff meeting to hear the then Principal tell the assembled company of teachers that they had all now had the opportunity to see "this new free programme" and that they must now start to put it into action in their own kindergarten! I still am shocked. I am shocked at the idea that a head teacher does not have enough encouragement to be different because

in each case her kindergarten, her children, her strengths, her circumstances are different. I am disturbed to see the same pattern of work replicated in kindergarten after kindergarten because free play programmes have become the new orthodoxy to be followed regardless of individual differences. I am concerned that programmes are designed without full consultation between staff, students and other adults, without aims, goals, planning or records. I am not impressed by statements like - "it was all right for you, you had years of experience", or again, "the Department, or the Association or the College, or whoever, won't let us." Let me repeat. This was a new way of working for me: I was no older than many teachers now the service; I was not experienced in the work of half-day programmes; I had a teacher's qualification but I had no higher qualifications than many of the teachers of the same age in the service now. I am not advocating that everyone should stop what they're doing now and do something else. But I am strongly advocating that teachers should be expected - even required - to produce a plan of action for the education of the children that is appropriate and personal to them, that is rooted in a knowledge of child development and that has aims and goals and a measure of the progress towards reaching those goals. I am also strongly advocating that those who hold responsibility in whatever capacity for the oversight of the kindergarten should respect the teacher's right to be different, and support and encourage her.

Morning and Afternoon Sessions

Back to 1949. I found that as well as a half-day morning kindergarten group I also had another group of 40 children in what was then known as a play centre. This was a misleading term because the playcentre movement had already begun to develop its own identity and different emphases, and the term "afternoon kindergarten" came into general use very shortly afterwards. The children came on 2 afternoons a week. I asked the difference between the groups and I was told that they were the next 40 children on the waiting list who came, with mother helpers, because the teachers had to work so many hours in the afternoon if they were to qualify for superannuation rights. I was also told - I think it was meant to be a reassurance - "you don't have to worry. It's not like kindergarten - they just play." Well, they did, but so did the morning children - what was different? In actual fact what was different was that the afternoon children (mixed 3's and 4's) got a watered-down version of the morning programme, not one planned specifically for them. They were, quite definitely, at that time, poor relations. In some Associations the teacher even kept two waiting lists, one for kindergarten and one for "playcentre" and the afternoon children had no automatic right of entry to morning sessions unless their names happened to be on the kindergarten as well as the "playcentre" waiting list. I must confess that it was not until I got into the Department and had seen very

many afternoon sessions that my unease about the afternoon sessions began to crystallise into conviction.

I felt that the afternoon children were getting less than they should for quite a number of reasons. One was that they came when the teachers are tired. Kindergarten teaching is tough work, mentally and physically and a lunch hour break whittled away by the late departure of some children and the early arrival of others makes, to say the least, an inauspicious start to the session. Another was that the operation of waiting lists tended to group the 4-year olds in the morning and the 3-year-olds in the afternoon so that the younger children still very dependent on their mother's support for successful entry (and, let's be clear - dependent mothers as well) all demanded a high degree of patience and sensitivity which the teachers could not always give. I believe that the KTA has something (something, not everything) when its members protest that 40 children in the morning is too large a group and that the 3-year-olds in the afternoon are too young, but I do wonder whether their difficulties could not be very much alleviated if the morning group and the afternoon group were not segregated by age but were both made up of mixed groups of 3's and 4's. It can be done and perhaps we can get round to discussing how.

Kindergarten Organisation

I think I have now formed the opinion that the traditional "start in the afternoon and be promoted to the morning" pattern should be seriously reconsidered. I believe there is no justification in the kindergarten, for the concept of "promotion". Neither do I believe that a child settling into his first group experience beyond the home should be expected to experience another settling process in the two years (or, more usually, considerably less) before he starts school. I know very well the value placed by parents and by the kindergarten movement generally of the child's attendance for five mornings a week but if that benefit conflicts with the disadvantages of moving from one group to another we should be looking at it a bit more closely. I also understand and appreciate the gain for the child of attending less often than five sessions a week when he first starts. But I can see no reason why that gradual admission cannot take place in the morning just as easily as in the afternoon if the parent and teacher get together on deciding when, how often, and for how long. I leave it to you to consider the advantages of two mixed-age, stable groups of children each getting equally well planned programmes of roughly equivalent time conducted by teachers who are fresh for their work.

Parents and the Kindergarten

Can we now get back again to 1949? I found in my kindergarten that there was a local committee and a mothers' club. Apart from the fact that the first was exclusively male and the second exclusively female (which was unusual, but there was a story behind it) I found it fairly difficult to distinguish between their roles. There was, in this case, some truth in the allegation that the mothers' club raised the money and the local committee spent it. Whatever the real truth was, I found I had to make a report to the committee each month and include in it all the requests I wanted to make for equipment, maintenance, repairs and servicing. At that time I confess I felt this process inefficient, time-wasting and amateur. As a trained teacher used to filling in a form listing everything I needed, sending it to some beneficent authority and in not too long a time getting it, I couldn't see why I had to justify, explain and request permission to get the normal tools of trade - especially when I tell you that in one bonus year in England I got a new electric typewriter for my secretary, a motor mower that the gardener could sit on and a station wagon for the use of the staff.

I know now that I was dead wrong in my judgement! When I started work in the Department travelling all over New Zealand and seeing at first hand the work of the associations and their subcommittees, I realised that the teachers and the parents were truly partners in providing kindergarten education; that most, if not all, of those tools of trade, (after their first purchase), were provided by the parents' money or their money-raising efforts. They had every right to be consulted about the price and the value to the children of what was to be provided. Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that money-raising is a way, still less the way, of getting and keeping parents' interest. I am simply saying that my New Zealand experience has convinced me that while parents and teachers have different roles in the kindergarten the kindergarten will thrive best if parents and teachers work together at all levels, and that involves having parents in on, and consulted about, the programmes and having teachers in on, and consulted about, the budgeting and management.

KINDERGARTEN TEACHER TRAINING

First Impressions

My time as a kindergarten teacher came to an end when I was appointed as Assistant Principal at the Wellington Kindergarten Training Centre. Here again I was in for some culture shocks. There was a full time staff of only three and one of those was the Supervisor of Students who spent most of her time visiting students on section.

The curriculum was, to say the least, sketchy. The library was practically non-existent. The facilities for art and craft, music and movement, physical education and sport were all somewhere else. The students ranged very widely indeed in both ability and motivation. The "core" lectures, mostly concerned with practical kindergarten work were carried by either the Principal or by me and other lectures were taken by a number of part-time staff who, in my time, varied from a highly distinguished Medical Officer of Health to a third year University student. There was no formal link between the students and any other student body. On the strength of those statements it would be very easy to condemn the training programme outright. But it would be very superficial to do so.

Along with these grave weaknesses there were enormous strengths. The first was that all the students were there for one purpose only - to be kindergarten teachers, and they certainly weren't in it for the money! This immediately gave a strong cohesion to the student group which lasts to this day and an equally strong bond between the full time staff and the students because they had a common goal and shared practical experience. Another advantage was that the premises, two lecture rooms and two staff offices in a rickety old two storey building, were directly above and beside the Nursery School - a long day kindergarten for 50 children with its own staff (which included a cook-housekeeper) and its own playrooms, dining room, kitchen, toilet facilities and playground. I might say that these premises were equally old and rickety. Adjacent to the building was the office of the secretary of the Association and the flat for the housekeeper and her husband who acted as handyman caretaker. And what, you might ask, did this have to do with the training? Well, I believe it had a lot. The Nursery School was in no sense an observation model or a "normal" kindergarten, but the very presence of the children and the work done with them enabled the students to acquire, in the most effective way possible, an awareness of children's behaviour and of the teaching skills of the staff. All the students had the opportunity to learn practical cooking, management of meals and of basic hygiene right on the spot by working downstairs in the kitchen as well as in the playroom. The Secretary's office next door was the first port of call for any student who had run short of money, wanted leave for special purposes, needed a reference, or a job that would enable her to be near her family or whatever. It was quickly apparent to them (and to me also, I might add) what an Association was, how it worked, who had authority for what and what authority it did not have. It is quite true that the training programmes lacked academic guts. It is also true that it gave a confidence born of familiarity that enabled practically all the students to survive their first teaching posts with enjoyment and success.

Training Now

Yet even in my time the training programme was an anachronism. If kindergarten teachers were to progress anywhere in a professional service it was necessary for them to have a better quality pre-service training and the moves to train them on the same terms as primary teacher students in teachers' colleges began. They are not yet complete. Kindergarten student teachers still have a two as against a three year course. They do not, in some places, have the same ease of access to University courses as primary student teachers and they are not, as yet, recognised as teachers under the Act. But the beginnings are there. My own chief concern at the moment is that we should take the best of the past and build on it with the facilities of the present to the advantage of the children, the teachers, and the whole service.

I believe that the students are getting a far better academic grounding than they did but I am dismayed by an apparent vacuum between the colleges and the service in which most of the students will seek their careers. It disturbs me that few of the people carrying out the task of training have had their grounding in the kindergarten service for which they are preparing their students and it also disturbs me that kindergarten people, teachers and administrators, are not coming forward strongly enough or in sufficient numbers to apply for positions or to carry their point of view into the colleges. When I say this I am in no way trying to apportion blame to anyone. Obviously, when students cease to become "our students" and become student teachers like other student teachers, a degree of intimacy is lost. But I have long believed that while there might be short term losses there will be long term gains. I believe the kindergarten associations should make it quite clear to the trainers of students what their movement is, what it stands for and how it operates, and, at the same time the colleges should be finding out and helping students understand what it is that they will be expected to do, how far their responsibility extends and where they do not have responsibility. Some of the recent publicity given to the teachers' roles as counsellors or their right to decide on kindergarten procedures such as admissions and group sizes indicate that the time is ripe for a clearer understanding between the trainers and the employers to get together, to find common ground on the things they all agree on, find understanding on things where their purposes diverge and join together in helping the student, who is the beginning teacher, do better for the children who are our first concern.

THE KINDERGARTEN ASSOCIATION

Now, let me go back again to the early 1950's. It was when I was in the training centre that I finally found out where Miss England and Miss Coulter and Mrs Eichelbaum

whom I have mentioned previously, fitted in. I was asked to report monthly to the Education sub-committee of the Association, and, occasionally, to the Council of the Association on what I was doing, why, how and what was the progress that had been made. And I discovered that that Council, that sub-committee, was made up mainly of women who carried names now familiar to me as being those of people of standing, rank and influence. I have heard them described as "do-gooders", "patronesses" and "charity organisers". Let me make it quite plain that I bale out from such descriptions with their overtones of denigration. These were women who gave their time, their effort, and often their money to help children who had fewer advantages than their own children. They could surely have found more pleasant ways of spending their time, if they wished, than attending meetings which ranged from the sociable to the acrimonious. And I have never found out why "doing good" is something to be sneered at. I know from my own experience that they were sincere, generous and intelligent and I believe, with hindsight, that their influential positions carried the kindergarten movement through a time when it could have foundered through lack of public awareness of the importance of the early years of a child's life. I want to pay tribute, here and now, to the work of those women who saw the kindergarten service through the difficult years of change from what was once regarded as a benevolent service to an educational service in its own right.

Association : Parents : Community

But the 1950's were years of social and educational change and more and more the responsibility of running a pre-school service was seen to belong to those who had the greatest stake in it - the parents. It gradually became accepted that the parents not only should, they could, shape the early education of their children by making the decisions that affected it. Associations and local committees increasingly became made up of men and women who were willing to volunteer their services to an organisation which was providing for their children. They often continued their interest and their service after their own children had moved on to more formal education in order to hand on to other, younger parents an understanding of what they had given and how and why. My own feeling is that it is proper for those who are part of an organisation to be those who make the decisions about the courses of action it should take but I know full well from my own experience how greatly parents involved in services for their own children can be helped and supported by others whose opinions can be more wise because they are not immediately and emotionally involved. I cannot agree with comments I have heard that the kindergarten service is not reflecting the needs of the community. For a start, it does not set out to be all things to every family in the community - whatever that is. For another, without full and continuing community support there would simply be no kindergartens. But there they are - all 513 of them.

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Let me move on. In 1953 I was appointed as Assistant Supervisor of Pre-School Services in the Department of Education. You know, I never did get the chance to be complacent. Everywhere I went, I was brought up with a sharp turn at something I hadn't expected, had to cope with and so, had to learn about. And that is the way it was when I went into the Department. I thought I knew about pre-school education. I had a pre-school and primary school training, and I had worked as a teacher and head teacher and a lecturer and had a few University units under my belt. Maybe I had something to offer. Well, maybe I did, but it wasn't nearly as much as I had to get. I found, in the Department, that not only my immediate boss, Miss Gallagher, but a very great many people from the Director of Education down, knew a very great deal more about education and pre-school education and the New Zealand Kindergarten movement than I had known existed. It was very salutary, I assure you. It was also tremendously exciting and stimulating and challenging and all those other words one uses to describe a new path of discovery. It was also harder work, longer hours, more disciplined and the working conditions are hard to believe in this day and age. There wasn't a filing cabinet so we used shoe boxes. Car travel and air travel was not allowed at that time for junior public servants, and I was very junior - how junior I was finding out. Other people knew more and had responsibility for buildings, finance, training, equipment - name it.

The Travelling Life

My first job was to get out of town and see as much as was humanly possible of the kindergartens that were, at that time operating from Whangarei to Invercargill and from New Plymouth to Napier. For over 11 years I travelled the whole of the country and my brief was to give what practical help I could and steer clear of policy issues that were none of my immediate responsibility. This caused me some difficulties. I found that in some situations I could give practical help. I know that sometimes I was able to help a teacher who was having control problems with the children and I know that sometimes I was able to hit the spot at a mothers' club meeting when they were tending to equate discipline with punishment or regimentation. I also know that as often as not the boot was on the other foot. I think I learned a great deal more from children about children, from teachers about teachers, and from parents in groups about parents and groups than they ever learned from me. And I really am more than sympathetic with those who don't know the difference between what is policy and what is practice because it took me a good many years to find out myself. It took me even longer to discover whose policy it was and what happens when one partner's policy conflicts with another partner's policy. But that was to come later. My chief impression on joining the Department

was one of admiration and respect for the cumulative wisdom, kindness, willingness to break the rules if someone was in trouble, and firm guidance on what can and what cannot be done. My first brashness gave way to a deep sense of obligation to the trust placed in me and to the stature of my controlling officers and my colleagues.

Administration. Pas de Deux

So this is now the mid 1950's and onwards and the patterns became clearer. The first was a pas de deux - a dance between two people, or two organisations in this case. My work was fairly evenly balanced between the associations which ran the kindergartens and the department which employed me. Almost every situation that arose from the drawing up of a model lease for a site or a building, or an enquiry from a teacher about - well about almost anything, or a request or a complaint or a note of thanks from a committee or association was a matter of direct personal communication between the association and the department, personified by Miss Gallagher.

Pas de Trois

But forces were at work to turn the dance for two into a dance for three. The Free Kindergarten Union was designated, quite deliberately, in the 1959 revised Regulations as the official body to speak for the kindergarten movement as a whole on all matters of policy. It was done in the interests of the movement which, with one national voice, could speak with more authority - or clout, if you prefer - than the individual voices, which did not always completely agree, of about 40 or 50 different associations. It also helped the Department to have discussions with one body only on matters of national interest which were binding on all the parties concerned. I would like to say here how much the movement has been served by the calibre of the Presidents of the Union who have pressed their case with dignity, courtesy and a willingness to compromise, but never to give way on matters of principle.

Autonomy

This growth in the participation of the Union in matters that had previously been left pretty well in the hands of the Associations, together with the growth of Government assistance, (which, of course, carried a measure of accountability because tax payers' money was involved) has caused and is still causing some fears. From time to time Associations speak out about an erosion of their autonomy. Let me pause on this point for a minute. I am uncomfortable about the word "autonomy". My dictionary defines it as "the right of self-government... a self-governing community". But I would maintain that

while every person and every organisation has a right of self-government, neither the individual nor the organisation has complete or exclusive rights of self-government. The individual must be constrained in many ways even in order to live in society. Each one is constrained by the laws under which he lives, by financial constraints, by constraints imposed by his commitment to other people. Similarly an organisation is limited in its freedom by the laws which it lives under, whether they are national legal requirements imposed from outside, or by the adoption of its own laws which give it shape and force. It must be recognised that autonomy is the freedom to live and to make decisions within defined limits.

The kindergarten service does have autonomy in some respects but in others it must appreciate that some limits, such as power of an elected Government to legislate for all citizens, even those citizens who are only 3 or 4 years old, must be understood and accepted. On the other hand, the Government itself, has limits: it does not have the power, unless the people allow it, to legislate on all matters concerning private individuals and private organisations.

This brings me to the point I want to make. When, over 75 years ago, the kindergarten movement asked for and accepted Government assistance it accepted the conditions made by the Government which governed that assistance. Each time the kindergarten movement asked the Government to help with or to take over certain responsibilities it surrendered some of its freedom. Examples are many and well known to you. To mention only three, the payment of students' allowances brought with it a control over the number of students, the amount of their allowance and pre-requisite qualifications for students entering training. Staff salaries brought limits on the number of teachers, their hours and terms of work. Building subsidies brought controls on the amount of finance available in any one year, the design of the buildings and a degree of control over where they were to be built. When people say to me, "Why doesn't the Government?" I always remember that old Spanish proverb - "Be very careful what you pray for, because you'll get it."

So far there is a fairly well accepted balance in the service between freedom from legislation on the one hand and controls by the Government or by the movement-in-Union on the other. But it must not be forgotten that freedoms can be lost. They can be surrendered in return for something given, such as student allowances or teachers' salaries or building subsidies. But they can also be lost in a far more subtle and, I believe, more dangerous way. Every time you as the Union or as an Association ask some other body - be it an Education Board or the Department or the KTA or whoever - to make a decision which is primarily yours to make, you surrender and may finally lose the freedoms you enjoy now.

For my part I believe that a joint partnership between the movement and the Department is a very workable, valuable feature of kindergarten work and I would not want to see it lost. Each partner has something to give that the other could not do, so well, without. But let us not talk about autonomy. Can we, instead, go forward with the idea of a marriage in which each partner depends on and supports the other while still remaining an individual with the responsibility of personal choice and joint decision-making on things that affect them both.

Pas de Quatre

In the last, say, 10 years the dance for three has become a square dance for four. The KTA has grown in size and stature to become an integral part of our work. The beginnings of KTA lie well back in the past. I know that when I first came to New Zealand and discovered more about my conditions of service I went to the NZEI General Secretary and had many discussions with him about the possibility of kindergarten teachers joining the teachers' organisation. Those early efforts did not come to fruition in the way I and others who followed me had envisaged. But the kindergarten teachers got themselves organised. When they became recognised as a service organisation with the responsibility for presenting their own case for salaries and for joining together on things that were of immediate concern to them a very significant force began to emerge. Let me say quite plainly that I applaud the teachers for realising that they have a stake, personally and professionally, for themselves, their colleagues and their successors in the kindergarten service, and for doing something to improve their own conditions and the provisions available for the children. This does not mean that I would necessarily agree with every statement made or every policy adopted or every course of action. But I do consider the fact that today's consultations of matters affecting teachers and their work must include consultations with the KTA is an entirely healthy one. To ignore the voice of the teachers could cause any new moves in the service to be achieved only with difficulty or, at worst, to founder. But to swing over entirely in the other direction and give teachers the loudest voices would endanger the very real rights of the parents and the Association and the Department.

The system we have now, of very sensitive checks and balances was not designed, I think, to be that way. It has evolved over the years and will continue to evolve. Working this way is not easy. It involves giving up to other people rights to be involved in deciding on courses of action on which any one party might have very decided views or long cherished traditions. It can be time-consuming or frustrating. But I believe that in the long run it brings benefits of mutual acceptance, regard and stability that augur well for a service for very young children.

The Future?

And what of the future? I am not going to predict. In so personal a service much will depend on the people involved now and on your and my successors. Let me say only that I have great faith in a movement which is grounded in ordinary people. The kindergarten movement has never hitched its wagon to any particular star that is bound to wane sooner or later; it has never adopted exclusively any particular academic or educational philosophy which must, as knowledge grows, be changed or even discarded. And I am sure that this is one of its great strengths. It will change, of course. You yourselves are in the process of changing your own administration. But change is not to be feared; it is to be welcomed provided that it is not change for the sake of change. It is a sign of continuing health and growth. I know that my going and that of Mrs Coe has been described by some as the end of an era. Well, it may be. But the end of one era is the beginning of another and the seeds of a new era are already healthily germinating now and will come to fruition and productiveness later, but I most sincerely believe that through our joint work, the kindergarten movement serves more children better than it did when I first met it. And I have no doubt that a continuing spirit of service will enable it to develop even better in the years ahead.

VALEDICTORY

And now it only remains for me to express my deep gratitude to you for all the acts of personal kindness and professional camaraderie that you have shown me. I cannot single out any person or any act for particular mention because to do so would be invidious when I owe so much to so many and for so long. I will just say that my warmth and depth of feeling for you all is rooted in the fact that - to quote a phrase of 2000 years ago - I was a stranger and you took me in. And all I can say is - Thank you.