

NEW ZEALAND FREE KINDERGARTEN UNION (INCORPORATED)

PRESIDENT'S OPENING REMARKS

On this, the last occasion when I shall have the privilege of addressing the Annual Meeting as President of the Union, I look back to 1957 when I was first elected and recall my doubts of my ability to undertake the task and I am reminded of the visit I paid, quite early in my term of office, to a rather isolated association to speak at a regional meeting. As I was leaving I thanked the secretary for her kindness and she replied, "Oh that's all right, Mrs Downer. It hasn't been nearly as bad as I expected - in fact I've quite enjoyed it." So it has been for me. Apart from some unpleasant tasks such as preparing these remarks each year and presenting remits which I do not personally support I have enjoyed the wonderful opportunities that you, the members of the Union, have given me for the past nine years and I would like most sincerely to thank you. I shall never forget the generous hospitality you have extended to me in your homes, the kindness you have shown in arranging functions and scenic outings for my pleasure and the warm friendship you have offered in all my dealings with you. I have been greatly honoured by invitations to present diplomas at all four Colleges, to open officially nineteen new kindergartens, to attend two Australian Pre-School Association Conferences and to visit your associations or make contact with them through regional meetings. It has been a most stimulating and interesting experience and I shall always be deeply grateful.

It is interesting to recall how one becomes involved in activities of different kinds. You probably became interested in kindergarten through your children but I have no children and therefore cannot expect even my grandchildren to attend. It is just sixteen years since I began to make preliminary approaches to the people of Rotorua on the need to establish a free kindergarten - the first in the Bay of Plenty. I did this, not only to provide a service for the growing numbers of pre-school children in the town, but also to give an opportunity for employment in their home district to girls whom I had taught at the Rotorua High School and whom I had encouraged to train for kindergarten teaching. If anyone had told me then that I would still be working for the movement in 1966 I would have considered the idea absurd. I well remember saying to my husband as we set out to attend the public meeting in November 1950, "I don't intend to become too involved in this." Famous last words!

If I have any regret, it is that I waited until I had retired from teaching to become involved, for if I had had the knowledge I have gained in the last sixteen years during my teaching days I am sure I would have been more effective. These years of voluntary service have been the most rewarding and demanding and absorbing of all the years I have given to education.

Looking back to that first contact with the movement in 1950 I am most forcibly struck by the changes that have come in this field of community service and education. I found it very difficult then to obtain much information on the kindergarten movement, for although the Union provided some it was very different from the clear-cut advice which is now available. It was not until the following year that pamphlets of information were ready for distribution and not until 1956 that the first issue of the Kindergarten Handbook was produced. The Union itself was in some disorder, as I discovered when I attended my first conference in 1951. I think of those attending this meeting only Mrs Shepard and Miss Hayward would know anything of that occasion. I think, too, that they would agree that the Union was reborn in that year and that it became a true Union in 1954 when the Auckland Association rejoined the family.

From the beginning of my contact with the movement I have been most fortunate. At the 1951 conference I was elected to a sub-committee to redraft the Union Constitution - an experience which gave me an early insight into the aims and objects of the Union and an



appreciation of the work still to be done. At the conference in Wanganui in the following year I joined the Executive as a non-training representative and have been most privileged to have continuous service at this level ever since. When I was elected President in 1957 the stage was set for progress and the foundations had been securely laid by earlier holders of this office. I shall always be grateful to those who gave me the opportunity to carry on the work and to those who have so loyally assisted me in the task.

I cannot and do not take any credit for what the Union has achieved during my term for no one person can do this work alone, but I think you will agree that no one has held office before at a time when so many factors combined to make for progress and development in pre-school education. The challenge to the Union in 1957 was issued by the then Director of Education, Mr C. E. Beeby, when he urged us to solve "the problems of success" which had arisen from rapid growth and had caused what he termed "fragmentation of control". He suggested some form of amalgamation of associations, where this was geographically possible, in order to gain greater stability in administration. One of the first tasks of the Executive was to examine this proposal and one of mine was to visit associations, where it seemed desirable, to explain its implications. Although some success was achieved and some development came through Kindergarten Regulations, I believe that more could still be done, with profit to the associations involved. I have seen the proposal work very happily in my own area, with significant advantages to committees and particularly to staff, and I feel sure that there is no regret in New Plymouth, South Taranaki, Franklin and Southland, where links were made to form stronger groups. I would earnestly commend further study of the proposal to associations in other areas. If my experience would help them I am more than willing to share it.

1958, Auckland's Golden Jubilee year, saw the gradual development, from the period of consolidation begun in 1956, to the policy of controlled expansion of new kindergartens with which we are all now familiar. Although those who are concerned with growth in their own associations are apt to be irked by what appears to be frustrating slowness, the record of the last nine years is more than impressive. 1958 - 3 new kindergartens, 1959 - 5. 1960 - 15. 1961 - 15 again. And then a halt, caused by a shortage of trained teachers, until 1964, when another 15 building programmes were approved. 1965 - 8, and in this year, 13 committees were given approval. This gives a total of 74 new kindergartens since the introduction of the present policy in 1958. But it is not the full story. During the same period 39 new buildings have been erected to replace temporary premises and four buildings have been purchased by the Department and remodelled for use for kindergarten teachers in training. When we consider that for each new building a subsidy of somewhere near £4500 was granted, and that with each new recognition, salaries for two kindergarten teachers become an obligation for all time, we have some appreciation of the investment in the kindergarten movement by Government and become more aware of our responsibilities towards it.

1958, too, saw the first real steps towards a national system of training and a more equal sharing of the costs of administration through a remit at that conference, but it was not until the next year that any actual contribution to these costs was made by associations outside the training areas. It was at first merely a token payment of £10 per recognised kindergarten. The first equal sharing did not take place until 1962. It has now become an accepted part of the responsibility of all kindergarten committees, and must surely have lightened the burden carried for so long by committees in the training associations. What is more important, in my view, is that it has increased the interest in and knowledge of the training colleges throughout the whole movement. In turn, it has brought greater understanding of the kindergarten programme and its educational significance. It is not enough to work for the establishment of kindergartens unless we know what they will provide ..



for the children who attend.

1959 also saw the gazetting, for the first time in complete form, of Kindergarten Regulations. For the Union, this was a year to remember. I recall Mr Ensor, then Superintendent of Education at the Auckland Regional Office of the Department, saying at the opening of the new building which replaced the old Logan Campbell Kindergarten that until now the Union had been like a body without a head, but, with the gazetting of the Kindergarten Regulations, it had achieved recognition as the body representing all associations in discussions with the Minister on matters of kindergarten policy. I remember, too, that in earlier years when the Executive pressed for regulations, Mr Beeby said we should not be in too great a hurry for these, "until we had put our house in order". 1959, then, saw that development and gave strength to all associations.

With the gazetting of Child Care Regulations in 1960, which the Union had requested for some years, the free kindergarten movement gained status, for free kindergartens are outside the scope of these rules, and have standards they are proud to uphold. In 1960 the Union held discussions with the Federation of Play Centre Associations on the possibility of moving towards a New Zealand Pre-School Association (something yet to be achieved) and received an invitation to become a constituent member of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. This wider contact has brought a deeper appreciation of our good fortune, for, from the knowledge I have gained, I would say that in no other country is there such a clear-cut policy for those who work for kindergartens. We know, from the outset, that, if we are prepared to help ourselves, help from Government will, in time, be given in double measure. We know, when our kindergartens are recognised, that grants for teachers' salaries will be met by Government, that the rate of salary is standard and approved and that we will not have to decline the services of an experienced teacher as in some parts of Australia because we do not feel we can raise the funds to meet the rate on which she should be paid. We know, because the information is freely available, what equipment to purchase and what will be subsidised. Our system is the envy of very many whose aims are identical with ours.

Concern for stability in staffing and longer service from our teachers led to the introduction of a bond through a remit passed at the 1961 conference. Though some fears were expressed about the effect this would have on recruitment they have not been realised, nor have those which believed that raising the educational attainment of students would deter applicants. At the 1964 Australian Pre-School Association Conference when this matter was discussed Dr Lucile Lindberg, who has recently visited N. Z., reported that in America whenever the standard had been raised the number and quality of recruits increased and this has been our experience. Already the impact of this has been seen in our kindergartens.

Besides being the Golden Jubilee year of the Christchurch Association 1961 brought significant developments in the Union. The Executive made submissions to the Commission on Education, in which it urged that the national system of education be extended to embody the free kindergarten system and that this be given recognition in the Education Act; that kindergarten teacher training be extended to cover the age range of 3 to 7+, and that the Minister of Education assume full responsibility for kindergarten teacher training and that a regional educational authority organise and administer all kindergarten activities. These submissions should continue to be the aims of the Union and should not be lost sight of.

From a financial point of view the decision taken at the 1961 conference that associations' subscriptions should be on a recognised kindergarten basis has brought stability and certainty to the Union's funds, as study of each year's balance sheet reveals.

1962 and 1963 saw definite progress towards a national system of



training. Discussions with the Department of Education led to approval of a pilot scheme whereby associations might transfer control of the kindergarten teachers' college to a Regional Board of Management and Education Committees might be replaced by Boards of Studies. You will hear later in this meeting how the Wellington Council of Management views this experiment.

Another anniversary was celebrated in 1964 when Dunedin reached the 75th year of its service to the movement and the Union published its history - an amazing record of voluntary effort and most certainly a success story, and again one bringing its problems, the most pressing being how to meet the ever-increasing demand for pre-school services and to meet them when and where they are most needed. You who attended the 1965 conference will remember the concern to find a way.

For many of you who have been associated with the years I have so briefly reviewed the story will be familiar; for those of you who are new to the movement I hope it will increase your pride and determination to serve it well, for there is still much to do. In my view the important tasks for the future are to establish a permanent office for the Union, to press for the integration of kindergarten teacher training with infant teacher training, to work for the establishment of a New Zealand Pre-School Association which will give the public a clear and accurate picture of all pre-school services, and to gain greater understanding of what pre-school education really means.

I am often asked if and when kindergartens will become part of the education system when they will be provided by Government. I cannot answer this question but I sincerely hope it will never happen. I firmly believe that the strength of our movement lies in the desire to establish kindergartens and the willingness to work for them. When we lose this motivating force we lose the vitality that has been such a striking feature of our history. There are already signs of loss in annual reports of associations which speak of the apathy of parents in well-established kindergartens. We must do all we can to resist this development and to realise our good fortune. If I can help in any way I shall always be willing to do so, for my interest will continue.

One last word.

Shortly after the last conference, as some of you know, for you were kind enough to send cheering messages, beautiful flowers and other thoughtful gifts, I had a spell in hospital. There was a bright young nurse whom I recognised as the daughter of one of my former pupils. When I mentioned this to her she stared in wide-eyed amazement and then said, "You taught Mum! I wouldn't have thought you were that old." I don't think I am that old, but as this year is the fortieth that I have given to education in one form or another, it is high time I retired. Thank you for allowing me to give nine of them to the Union as your President. It has been a great honour and privilege.