

May I first of all thank the President and Executive of the N. Z. Free Kindergarten Union for the great honour they have extended to me in asking me to open this, the Union's 1969 Conference. I cannot imagine how I have earned this honour for my contribution to the kindergartens of N.Z. has been a slender one.

I remember having lots of fun raising money to establish the Burwood Kindergarten in Christchurch and more recently joining working bees of fathers at the Papatoetoe Kindergarten in Auckland. Any other contribution I have made seems to have had far less tangible results. Perhaps I have been asked as a representative of the large number of primary school teachers who are now "converted" to a fuller appreciation of the vital roles of the kindergarten and the play centre in the growth of many young children. If this is the case, I approach my task with a great deal more enthusiasm.

May I also at this stage congratulate the Southland Free Kindergarten Association on reaching its Golden Jubilee -- a fine performance. This is my first visit to Invercargill and to have made the journey to assist in the promotion of pre-school education is most satisfying personally.

I am well aware of the splendid work being done voluntarily by the many people who make up the Kindergarten Union and who are represented by the delegates at this conference. I commend you all for what you have done and wish you well for your efforts in the future -- particularly over the next few days.

I do not intend tonight to deliver an address of an inspirational nature, mainly because I am not qualified to do so. Rather I would like to speak to you as a primary teacher, who has watched the development of pre-school education over more than thirty years, and who has become increasingly aware of its role in the education of young New Zealanders.

A recent statement in a North Island paper read:-

"Serious problems face the expansion of pre-school education in Auckland and elsewhere in New Zealand. This very lack of adequate facilities, many believe, is creating equally serious problems for the children involved."

What are some of these problems, and what do they mean to children during their early primary school years and, perhaps, later?

What are some of the steps being taken to find a solution to these problems, and how much progress has been made?

All over the civilized world there has been a rapid recognition of the previously unsuspected importance of schooling for the under-fives. I do not think I am letting my educational colleagues down when I say that in the past we have, to a large extent, underestimated the importance of children's developing capabilities in the pre-school years.

As educators we are well aware that children develop along four broad lines, and that satisfactory development in each of them is essential if a child is to grow into the kind of adult who will gain the most from his own life, and, at the same time, contribute generously toward the "good life" of others.

These four aspects of growth are well known to you as social, emotional, physical and last, but to a teacher, not the least, intellectual.

We are coming to accept more and more that growth along these lines must be continuous, that it should be as steady and as uninterrupted as possible.



All of us have noticed how, with children, various abilities or forms of behaviour appear without training when sufficient development has taken place, or, that a child is ready to learn at a certain time. This development, or maturation, is beyond our control. It is inherited and follows set patterns. Probably, it is on the physical side that it can be seen most clearly -- a baby lifts its head, rolls over, sits, stands and finally walks. Parents do not have to explain how or give the child special exercises. He does it when he is ready to do it and we are aware from experience that forcing it or delaying it rarely assists normal development in young children.

It is similar with personality development. With the passing of time children are ready to accomplish certain tasks in learning how to be 'persons'. To do this best children depend on the attitude of those around them, particularly their parents and family.

From the very beginning, children need love and protection and then they need to develop confidence in their ability to go alone physically and to experiment for themselves. This will lead on to the development of a child's "selfness" or individuality, that he wants to sense is both worthy and reliable and that it is accepted and appreciated by other people. Contributing towards this, the under-fives have an uncontrollable urge to use their imagination and inventiveness on everything and everyone around them in ways particularly their own. Opportunities to do so are essential if growth is to be normal.

More recently we have become aware of the great importance for children of being able to identify their experiences with words. A two year old is immensely interested in words and the use of them. He longs in his own way to have the intimate contact with other people through speech, which he sees the grown-ups or older children are able to have with each other.

All children, but especially these under-fives, understand a great many more words than they use but we now know that children who are not talked to by others, who do not play happily with others, who are not listened to by others, and who do not have a wide range of experiences, are poorer in speech than those who enjoy the stimulus of conversation. Poverty of speech in any person means a lack of ability to express one's thoughts and feelings and to communicate generally.

Recent studies by educational psychologists have opened up new knowledge about how children learn. As with all other aspects of child growth, learning, especially about the physical world around them, follows a set pattern. And again they will learn best when they are ready to learn and when knowledgeable parents or teachers provide the right kind of opportunities.

Now for large numbers of children development along these lines is posing no problem at all.

Parents of these children are clearly, or at least generally, aware of the main problems associated with the growth of the under-fives. Through development of an understanding of what is best for their children, or intuitively, (perhaps both) they are providing, in the daily life of their homes, the experiences the toddlers need to provide a foundation for growth. Some of them send their children to pre-school centres to supplement the already adequate contribution the family can make towards the pre-schoolers' all round growth. I sometimes wonder if the places taken by these children on your kindergarten rolls can be justified when viewed on a national basis.

Then there are parents who feel that something is missing from the lives of their children but they cannot identify just what it is. Wise guidance and counselling on the part of teachers and others often mean that these children reach a pre-school service that fulfills the child's needs quite adequately.



On the other hand there is a tremendous number of parents who know nothing of the value of pre-school education, either in their own homes and environment, or in the kindergartens and play centres throughout the country. Many of them tell teachers in the primary service that they wish that they had known, and admit that they should have done something earlier, when they find that their child is not adjusting easily or successfully to school life.

And then there is the altogether too large proportion of parents who are not interested in helping their children in ways other than meeting the care needs, often with little enthusiasm, of compulsory parental responsibilities such as dressing them, feeding them and sending them to school when they become five. Often the first contact we have with them is when they present themselves, without Mum or Dad, for enrolment in the primary school.

Now what are these situations meaning to the primary schools and to primary school teachers?

It can be said that not only some parents, but most primary school teachers, are becoming much more aware of the significance of the handicapped start that springs from a lack of early experience in childhood -- experiences that help children to develop in the best possible manner prior to their entry into school. A form of scepticism that was once held by many of our infant mistresses, as to the value of play centre or kindergarten, is disappearing quite rapidly. The infant mistress who did not like "ex-kindergarteners" because they had too much personality is rarely seen these days.

We in the primary service now realise that many children deprived in this way tend to feel failure and in turn produce failure. Such a child who experiences a sense of disapproval or failure can start a process in which retardation produces more retardation. Although it is difficult to prove this statistically, most headmasters believe that many cases of reluctant learners in primary and secondary schools can be traced back to a lack of pre-schooling in its broadest sense.

A large number of those who make up the gang element in our cities are certainly ones who have not been successful at school. It could easily be that the marked trend for Maoris to waste their ability, at times, in unskilled occupations, may well, in part, arise from the same cause.

Many infant mistresses, and it is hard to disagree with them, say that some children are "doomed" from the start of their primary schooling through lack of the right background at home and because of lack of pre-schooling. Certainly a great deal of language, and especially reading disability, can be traced back to a lack of worthwhile pre-school experience.

It has been aptly said "No child can skip pre-school experience. He must get it when he comes to school if he does not get it before." Primary teachers accept this today, especially the teachers in our junior schools.

In Auckland this, in fact, often happens. An infant mistress sets up what is virtually a pre-school centre in one of her classrooms, and certain children are channelled through that room before embarking on the primary school programme proper.

Those who have had the earlier opportunities to play with blocks and sand and water are itching to face up to the challenge of books, but those deprived of that kind of experience through directed play are still wanting to get into sand.

As you know, this talk of play is puzzling to some parents and was once frowned on by primary teachers. But when you pre-school people use the term you mean it to embrace a whole philosophy not guessed at by outsiders. You have done the primary system a



real service in this regard because you have shown us that to the five and six year old play is really work, and the amount of real learning that can come from play activity is quite staggering. We now know that play stretches children's minds and bodies, and that in their play they learn to live with others by finding out about people and at the same time by trying themselves out in the company of others.

We have now learned that when children are playing, our task, as was the parents and pre-school teachers before us, becomes one of understanding the kind of childhood play to be provided for, its value to growing children, its meaning in the progress of mankind, and the equipment and supervision needed for it to be of most value.

In virtually every primer classroom in the country, directed or undirected play makes up a large proportion of the daily programme. We have learned much of this from the kindergartens and play centres of the country and we are making considerable educational capital from it. We are also using many of your ideas in the provision of suitable equipment.

I have watched many children with pre-school experience enter our new entrant rooms, and I have very frequently noticed that they adjust to their teacher much more quickly than those who have not had that experience. It is clear to me that the relatively small groups that can be catered for in our pre-school centres allow for the early development of a very satisfactory pupil-teacher relationship. This is a great help when the child first enters a primary school class often of forty children. Most children have a great deal of difficulty in adjusting to this situation where teacher cannot be as accessible or as close as the young five year old needs for a real security.

Right through a child's schooling, contact and communication with parents is essential if development is to be steady and continuous. There is no doubt that pre-school centres establish a close relationship between teachers and parents, that they use this with skill and insight, and that parents, teachers and children all benefit from it. We are coming more and more to realise the value of this, and parents, who were once given the impression that they were not wanted once a five year old's "real" education began are being made to feel that they have as vital a role to play in formal education as they had in the child's informal pre-school activities.

Because of this growing awareness of the important role played by parents and pre-school teachers in the development of young bodies and minds, we find that junior primary school teachers and pre-school teachers are finding a great deal of common ground in the nature and extent of their work. The 1962 Currie Commission said that it could see quite clearly that "pre-school and infant school are alike in so many ways" and that "this being so there is no reason why there should not be fruitful interchange of idea and procedure in both directions."

A logical development of this has been an ever-widening number of pre-school/primary school teacher liaison groups that are being established throughout the country. I have been concerned in sponsoring these groups in Auckland for the last five years and I have been delighted with the enthusiasm, co-operation and insight displayed by play centre, kindergarten and junior school teachers at meetings held by these groups.

Common among the declared purposes of these groups are such functions as:

1. Getting to know one another better as people and as teachers of very young children.
2. Planning collectively to ensure that no stone is left unturned

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in providing for continuous growth and development on the part of our young children, particularly in local areas.

Two typical examples of this are:-

- (a) Catering for the above average child who intellectually is ready for formal learning before he is five, and who starts his primary school career ahead of the majority because of this.
  - (b) Our formal education syllabuses today lay great stress on the early appreciation of basic mathematical and scientific concepts, and the acquisition of the necessary language. Local groups are planning most skilfully to help children with this aspect of their development.
  - (c) Collating the resources available for the widening and up-grading of pre-school education among the under fives. Support is enlisted from such people as the plunket nurse, school nurse etc. right through to the local newspapers and even the hairdressers.
4. Helping individual children move easily from pre-school to primary school, particularly where a child is having social or emotional problems. This is being done in a variety of ways, most of them informal.
  5. Fostering joining professional in-service training with the aim of developing the greatest possible understanding of children's developmental problems from birth to approximately eight years of age.

Three years ago it was my privilege to act as chairman of a committee set up to revise the training programmes of your kindergarten colleges and to put them on a national basis. The recommendations from that committee were in many ways distinctly different from the work of the colleges at that time. However, because they were basically very similar to training programmes for teachers in our primary and also secondary teachers' colleges, and were aimed at developing young kindergarten teachers, academically, professionally, and as persons, they were readily accepted by the four colleges. I understand that, three years later, enthusiasm for the new programmes comes not only from the Education Committees for the Training Associations, and the College lecturers, but also from the student teachers themselves. Because of this common basis liaison in the future should be even more readily undertaken and more effective in its outcome.

6. Many groups have the objective of trying to get parents who normally would not send their children to pre-school or appreciate the significance of experiences at that level.

I should like to develop this last point at length.

Primary teachers are convinced that one of the greatest problems where young children are concerned is, as I have already indicated, the problem of providing appropriate pre-school education where and when it is most needed. I am well aware that this conference will feel that it has enough on its plate, with its present agenda, to spare a thought for the children who need pre-school opportunities but cannot get them. But these children clearly need help from dedicated groups such as are represented here at this conference, if we are to solve an educational problem of national importance.

We, in the primary school, as well as our secondary colleagues, know just how many children come to school ill prepared to cope with the normal demands made upon them. These demands are not unrealistic for these children who have had opportunities to grow up to the ripe old age of five through a wide range of exciting and stimulating experiences, but they cannot be easily



handled by large numbers of children, especially in our rapidly-expanding urban areas. For many of them early failure is followed by gradual development of unhealthy attitudes and behaviour. Eventually many of them become reluctant learners.

Not all of these children are confined to a particular ethnic group -- Maori, Island and European children are all represented. The reasons for the poverty of their backgrounds are equally numerous and varied. But of all the children in this group who get away to a bad start, most lose ground, a few hold their own, and all too few rise above it to compete on an equal footing with their successful classmates.

Try as our teachers will, (and valiant efforts are being made), they appear to have little lasting impact on many of these young minds. The lack of language, in early childhood, is hard to overcome, and is not conducive to language growth later. Lack of language means a shortage of effective communication and this in its turn leads to under-developed personalities. Teachers are often frustrated because they just do not know how many average or bright young minds fail to flourish because of the lack of ability, in some children, to put their ideas into words.

Even though most children enjoy their schooling these days, the type of child I am referring to shows a reluctance to attend school regularly and a lack of enthusiasm for it when he is there. Often, a programme designed to help a child overcome an impoverished background is clearly too late because failure and frustration are already a part of the child's make-up.

No solution to this problem, which clearly is a national one, is to be found easily or by one person or one body such as yours. But attempts to solve it, many consider must be made and made soon.

I believe these pre-school/primary school liaison groups I have just referred to are doing a grand job in this connection and deserve support. I know too that this Union is not unaware of the problem and has supported a number of moves to assist with it.

May I suggest to you another possibility that has been uppermost in the minds of many primary school teachers, especially in rapidly-growing housing areas. It is in these areas, and Auckland and Wellington delegates will know them well, that homes seem to spring up like mushrooms, that families are young and relatively large, and that family incomes are barely sufficient to support the family and a gradual development of the property. Primary teachers are well aware that the setting up of pre-school facilities in these areas is most urgent when the families first arrive, when the children are young and at a time when parents are least able to contribute money to build kindergartens. Buildings that play centres might use are also non-existent at this stage.

As a project well worth investigating, it is suggested that a mobile pre-school room be considered, similar to the prefabricated classroom used by Education Boards for primary schools. These rooms could be moved into areas where the need is greatest when the need is greatest. In Auckland, I know, and the same probably applies to other areas, Education Boards are developing a section for pre-school use adjacent to new primary school grounds. Once mobile kindergartens are established, ways and means could be found by committees to build up funds for a permanent kindergarten, and eventually free the mobile kindergarten for use elsewhere.

Financing a project such as this is not impossible. Local bodies, local industries and the State could well be sufficiently interested to at least make a trial of this system possible.

Again, in such areas, family holidays are not a strong feature of family life. During the term and Christmas holidays, as well as on Saturdays, primary school buildings could be used for pre-school activities if local associations were to organise Directors (perhaps one-time Directors who have married and were available) to



set up a kindergarten. Though to some extent the importance of continuity would be lost, a move of this nature would make inestimable difference to the development of many young children at a time when it was urgently needed.

Moves such as these may have been made, but the need now is becoming very urgent indeed.

I make this plea on behalf of the many teachers who receive into their schools at the age of five so very many children who could lead a happy and successful life at school had they had the chances of their more fortunate playmates. These teachers know that a pre-school unit does not aim to prepare children for school earlier, or to prepare them solely for school life, but to encourage actively and purposefully a developing and exciting life which will bring a degree of readiness to enable them to commence schooling eagerly and be able to cope with it.

I am well aware that Government approach to the provision of kindergartens is continuing to become more flexible. The recent ministerial approval to a change in the policy covering the size of kindergartens is evidence of this. Has the "mini-kindy" become part of the pre-school jargon yet?

In conclusion, may I go back to where this address started? Over the decades the kindergarten has changed from its original role, when as a somewhat philanthropic gesture, waifs and strays from the street could play in safety under kindly supervision and perhaps be provided with food and warm clothing. Today we see kindergartens not as a form of creche but a place that provides opportunities for informal learning where intellectual, social, emotional and physical development may proceed at an optimum level. This has been brought about, in the main, because of our growing knowledge of child development and, in particular, the fact that the development of intelligence can be affected by change in the environment and that the 3 - 5 year period is critical in terms of the child's language and sensory experiences.

In the light of this knowledge the present function of the pre-school service is to supplement and enrich the environment of the young child. Undoubtedly the kindergartens operating today do a splendid job in this regard, and the primary schools, for one, are able to build on the good foundation laid.

We in the primary service need more help and the special challenge, as we see it, is the provision of a pre-school service for all those unfortunate children who desperately need it and who are not able to receive it. Can we afford not to provide it for them in some way or other. In part the answer may well lie in your hands.

It is with great pleasure that I now declare this 1969 Conference officially open.