

Pre-School Education Centre, Dunedin 1940s

With summary notes adapted from:

Helen May (2014) *People, places and play in the 'child gardens' of Dunedin, Dunedin Kindergartens - Mana Manaaki Puawai O Otepoti 125 years old*, Dunedin Kindergartens, chapter 4.

The idea for demonstration Pre-School Education Centre (PEC) came from Dr Helen Deem who had been appointed the new medical advisor to Plunket in 1939 after the death of Sir Truby King in 1938. Plunket wanted a more proactive role in the health of the preschool-aged child and an opportunity for Karitane nurses to train in a preschool setting. This became a partnership and joint venture between the the Dunedin Free Kindergarten Association (DFKA) and the Plunket Society. Their submission to Government detailed how the health benefits of nursery schools had proved their worth in England and Australia. The reference to Australia was important, because the Commonwealth Government was in the midst of establishing a Lady Gowrie Centre in each state capital. The PEC opened in 1941 at the Truby King Harris [Karitane] Hospital at Andersons Bay. The building and grounds were not ideal, particularly in relation to outdoor play space, and a campaign for proper buildings began immediately. These eventuated in 1955.

[Link to: [Helen Deem Centre for Pre-school Education 1950s](#)]

Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton was appointed the foundation Director and remained in the position until 1951 when she became the Principal at the DFKA. Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton had trained as a kindergarten teacher in Wellington and in 1937 won a Carnegie Fellowship to undergo further training with Susan Isaacs at the Institute of Education at the University of London. She returned to New Zealand imbued with the latest ideas on progressive education.

The Centre integrated the two key strands of childrearing in the twentieth century: the scientific medical approach, and a progressive psychoanalytic pedagogy, with the excesses of both being avoided in the blend. Monthly reports reflect Hamilton's skills in balancing new educational ideals with the more regimented daily health inspections and training requirements from Plunket. This can be seen in her careful moderation of Plunket requirements for clean plates, and children eating up their dinner, with her own knowledge of the fickleness of the preschool eater. There was a parent education programme with talks were given on such topics as dental decay, foot disabilities, personality. The centre initially operated from 9.15 a.m. until 2.30 p.m. with two $\frac{3}{4}$ hour periods of free play. There were daily routines of health inspection, sleep, lunch, milk and apples, toileting, group story time and rhythmic activity. Nevertheless, Hamilton's reports indicate she placed emphasis on creating an environment that allowed choice and independence. The Centre was under scrutiny, set up by organisations that emphasised order and good habits in children. Hamilton was not going to risk promoting too much freedom.

NEW EDUCATIONAL VENTURE

PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE AT ANDERSON'S BAY

Miss Stewart Hamilton, of Wellington, who arrived in Dunedin this week, is to have charge of the new pre-school educational centre, to be opened in one of the cottages in the grounds of the Truby King-Harris Hospital at Anderson's Bay. Twenty children from the ages of two to five years will attend and stay all day and have their mid-day meal.

In this way a link is to be formed between Karitane baby nursing and kindergarten training of the small child. The Karitane trainees will receive instruction in the school in pro-



MISS STEWART HAMILTON.

viding for the all-round development of the very small child and kindergarten trainees will get an insight into the physical welfare of the children under their care, specially with regard to general nutrition. Miss Hamilton received her kindergarten training in Wellington, afterwards going abroad and specialising in child development at London University under Dr Susan Isaacs, with practical training and observation at the Rachael M'Millan School at Deptford and other up-to-date nursery schools.

Travelling to America for further study, she attended Columbia University, the Iowa Research Centre for pre-school children and also studied in San Francisco under Dr Louisa Wagoner.

It will thus be seen that Miss Hamilton brings a wide knowledge to the new position she has undertaken.

Since returning to New Zealand she has been director of the Newtown Free Kindergarten until coming south to commence her duties here next term.

Further information

- Helen May, (1997, 2013, 2nd ed.) *The Discovery of Early Childhood*, NZCER Press, Wellington, pp. 360-365
- Archival records for the Pre-School Education Centre are held in the Hocken Collections – Uare Takoka o Hākena, University of Otago
 - Royal New Zealand Plunket Society Records, MS-2920/1436, ARC-2004
 - Dunedin Kindergarten Association Records, AG-287/037 and AG-287/031, ARC-0261
 - Margaret Just Scrapbooks, 85/153
 - Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton Scrapbooks, ARC-0512
 - Photographs of the Pre-School Education Centre are held in the collections of the Dunedin Kindergarten Association and the Royal NZ Plunket Society. Permission to reproduce must be sought from Hocken Collections – Uare Takoka o Hākena, University of Otago. Several digitised images are reproduced with permission.



Dr Helen Deem examining a child,
RNZPS, AG-007-007/007/001, S12
624e, Hocken Collections – Uare
Takoka o Hākena, University of
Otago



The daily inspection of throats, tonsils and glands by Sister M. Shepherd, RNZPS, AG-007-007/007/001, S12 624c, Hocken Collections – Uare Takoka o Hākena, University of Otago



Karitane sister and kindergarten teacher assist 'dinner is served'

RNZPS, AG-007-007/007/001, S12 624a

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'Miss Preshaw assists a young pupil'

RNZPS, AG-007-007/007/001, S12 624d, Hocken Collections – Uare Takoka o Hākena, University of Otago



'Giving expression to their creative impulses'

RNZPS, AG-007-007/007/001, S12 624b
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