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Advocacy and collaboration in the kindergarten movement of Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

Kindergarten is embedded into the cultural landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. Generations of children have been ‘kindy kids’, with the kindergarten a site of community and family endeavour; a support to parents; and a prelude of playful activity and learning for kindergarten children prior to the uniquely ‘kiwi’ rite of passage when they bid farewell to kindergarten friends and teachers to start school on the day of their fifth birthday (Duncan, 2009). The kindergartens of Aotearoa New Zealand trace their heritage to the German kindergarten movement established by Friedrich Froebel in the 1840s with a legacy still evident in the nationwide kindergarten movement of the twenty-first century. This chapter illustrates two snapshots of kindergartens concerning firstly, the early decades of its colonial beginnings and the formation of a national infrastructure, and secondly some insight into the Froebelian legacy enacted by the national kindergarten organisation, New Zealand Kindergartens Incorporated – Te Pūtahi Kura Pūhou o Aotearoa (NZK), in current times.

Growing a colonial kindergarten movement

A loosely linked kindergarten movement emerged across the city settlements of colonial Aotearoa New Zealand in the late nineteenth century. It embraced initiatives by individuals, schools, churches and welfare societies. Most of these ventures were shortlived, with the exception of the Dunedin Free Kindergarten Association established in 1889 and still operating (May, 2014). The links were not formal, but were fostered through interpersonal collaborations across reform minded organisations, whose members included women’s suffrage campaigners alongside prime ministers and politicians. This fledgling movement spearheaded various campaigns to establish a system of kindergarten education, separate to school, for young children.

The timing of colonial settlement coincided with the emergence of the kindergarten in Germany. New ideals of kindergarten childhood sat well in the mix of colonial-utopian endeavour of a New World society. This encouraged the seeding of kindergarten ideas and
kindergarten institutions: combining settler endeavour and the Froebelian kindergarten promise of a ‘new child’ (May, 2016). The story of this relocation across continents and cultures to the New World colony of Aotearoa New Zealand that led to the establishment of a national free kindergarten movement independent of, but in partnership with government, has been told in the book Growing a Kindergarten Movement in Aotearoa New Zealand: Its People, Purposes and Politics (May and Bethell, 2017). The themes of political advocacy and collaborations across boundaries are clues to the success and longevity of the kindergarten movement in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Froebelian legacy enacted in Aotearoa New Zealand was threefold, embracing pedagogical principles, professional ideals and political advocacy. The key elements of Froebelian pedagogy: songs, games and movement; craft ‘occupations’; building block activities with ‘gifts’; gardening and engaging with nature outdoors are still evident in kindergartens of today albeit transformed in detail and appearance as well as enriched by later progressive ideas (May, 2016). From the start, and enacting Froebel’s radical idea of specialist women kindergarten teachers, training programmes were established alongside the new kindergarten programmes. This legacy is present in current specialist teacher education programmes for early childhood, equivalent to other education sector programmes, and a 100% qualified kindergarten teaching body that won a long time campaign for equal pay with primary and secondary teachers in 2002.

The idea of an organisation for kindergartens to provide a national voice and presence in the policy arena of education was initiated in 1912 and in 1913, the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union Incorporated (NZFKU) was established, but the outbreak of World War One delayed its formal constitution until 1926. The Union was tasked to co-ordinate the work of the five free regional kindergarten associations then in operation. From the start, NZFKU took the lead in the co-ordination of kindergarten training across city regional associations, instigating funding negotiations with respective governments, promoting a more progressive playful pedagogy for educating children, and consistently advocating more broadly on behalf of the health, housing and well-being of young children and their families. In the post-World War II era, the Union worked closely alongside the Department of Education as its flagship preschool institution: co-ordinating the rapid expansion of kindergartens across towns and suburbs, and improving standards in relation to kindergarten programmes, buildings, equipment, staffing and qualifications. By 1975, there were 75 associations affiliated to NZFKU. Today, the number of affiliated associations has more than halved mostly through amalgamation. Similarly, the landscape of early childhood provision has broadened to include a range of private and community provision including childcare, language immersion centres and parent-led and home-based programmes. In 2004, the current name of New Zealand Kindergartens Incorporated – Te Pūtahi Kura Pāhou o Aotearoa – was constituted. At its launch Roger McClay, the government appointed Commissioner for Children spoke:

A child tonight would say thanks to this famous New Zealand icon – now New Zealand Kindergartens Incorporated. It is not the name, but rather the group of people and what they deliver which children would want to say thank you for . . . Thank you for putting into practice, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child . . . especially for implementing the particular articles about our right to education. The articles aim at developing our personalities, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest extent. Children are very grateful for such effort. They would expect me on their behalf to say THANK YOU New Zealand Kindergartens Incorporated for delivering so long and so well on these sorts of things.

(cited in May and Bethell, 2017: 223)
McClay was surely echoing the sentiments of Froebel’s missive ‘Come let us live with our children’ stating that kindergarten was “about doing what is in the best interests of children” (May and Bethell, 2017: 223). Remembering and enacting these ideals remains a goal of NZK in new times.

Influence and advocacy of New Zealand Kindergartens Inc. – Te Pūtahi Kura Pūhou o Aotearoa in current times

In 2017, NZK represents the interests of 25 regional associations which provide over 460 services to around 23,000 mainly 3- and 4-year-old children and their families. Kindergarten reflects an increasingly diverse society in Aotearoa New Zealand and is in all communities with most being in low to middle socio-economic areas. While Froebel’s legacy remains strong in kindergarten, visible in the teaching and learning taking place each day, the service itself has adapted to reflect and meet the needs of changing populations. From a traditional half-day, age-defined programme, children across age groups attend kindergarten together with some choosing to stay for a morning or an afternoon or for the whole ‘school’ day of 6 hours. A professional workforce of over 2,000 degree-qualified teachers is employed across the network, supported by curriculum, cultural and specialist advisors also employed by associations. NZK and its member associations are constituted as incorporated societies, and are not-for-profit, community-based registered charities.

Kindergarten is the benchmark for other teacher-led early childhood education services in Aotearoa New Zealand. Its influence on policy and practice has endured. The outcomes for children of attending kindergarten and the commitment to engaging with parents and caregivers, a trained and well supported teaching workforce and child-centred learning environments have shaped policy settings across early childhood education. In 2011, government funding to kindergarten was cut by 14%. Coming under increasing financial pressure, associations worked to find ways to ensure kindergarten remained accessible, affordable, inclusive and of high quality. In large part they succeeded, remaining true to kindergarten values. However, in order to sustain that position, a progressive political agenda placing the well-being and success of children and families at its heart, is key.

As the central, independent voice of the kindergarten movement, it is NZK’s role to influence the political agenda of the government of the day. NZK is regarded as a strong and credible advocate for young children and families, building alliances across education organisations and taking a prominent role at a national level as a member of Ministerial and agency advisory and reference groups. While maintaining a focus on early childhood education, NZK takes a broader view of the position of kindergarten within society and in relation to the wider education system, and the influence of the early childhood education curriculum, Te Whāriki on the first few years of schooling (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017a). Communities of Learning: Kāhui Ako aim to build a professional collaboration across settings, focusing on key aspects of children and young people’s learning to enhance their educational success (Ministry of Education, 2017b). Kindergarten is well-placed to collaborate beyond ‘transition to school’ to a professional dialogue around pedagogy and teaching practice in dynamic and innovative learning spaces.

A new Labour-led government was elected in 2017 and, as we enter a different political landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand, kindergarten is optimistic about the future of early childhood education. NZK and its member associations are the stewards of kindergarten, ensuring a strong and enduring future for kindergarten. In its briefing to the incoming Minister of Education, NZK described its contemporary view of kindergarten, stating:

We believe access to high quality early childhood education is a right for every child. We see each child being at the centre of our decision-making and endeavour . . . We know the public good benefits of high quality teaching and learning . . .
Our engagement with children, their parents and caregivers, and family and whānau provides a broader understanding of the diverse and complex communities we are part of. We see the impact of poor health, inadequate housing, and unemployment and underemployment in our communities. We applaud the government’s focus on lifting children out of poverty and we see a role for kindergarten in partnership with government, to expand and better support our communities. We see the potential for kindergarten to be a catalyst for engaging parents and caregivers in education with their children, and re-engaging with education as adults.

We have ambition for early childhood education services me ōngā kohanga reo in Aotearoa New Zealand. We expect every child and their whānau will have the opportunity to experience and participate in exceptional education in their community that is rich in their culture and meets their aspirations and dreams.

(NZK, 2017: 4)

There is no doubt the kindergarten movement will continue to change and adapt as society demands of us in future. What is certain, however, is that Froebel’s legacy will live on in Aotearoa New Zealand for generations of children and their families to come.
Case studies, development projects and practitioner publications exploring Froebelian approaches to early childhood education

Introduction to part II

Part II

Theory grows out of and is modified by practice and practice is directed and modified by theory continually.

(Esther Lawrence (undated) Women’s Employment Publishing Co.: 2)

Case studies, development projects, resulting in communities of learners and practitioner publications

Part II demonstrates the diffractive ways in which Froebelian knowledge is shared at local and global levels. It gives readers nuanced and layered glimpses of what Froebelian education and ways of connecting is like in practical contexts of different kinds. There are points for both reflection and action for policy makers and researchers, which are taken up in Part V.

Froebelians have always determinedly begun with a consideration of what it is to live with children, or to spend time with them. That is the starting point. Out of this arise philosophical questions which are deep and lead to communities of families and practitioners searching for navigational tools to support their everyday lives, and to do their best in providing worthwhile ways of bringing up their children and giving them educational experiences of quality which will have lifelong influence. The different sections in this part II of the book are gathered together in this spirit.

There are case studies of nursery settings in New Zealand and Scotland. There is a family breakfast experience in England when jazz is shared between children and parents. There are practical development projects, one building on and extending the work (begun in the 1950s) of the Froebelian Elinor Goldschmied, another reflecting on the Collaborative Froebel Blockplay
Case studies, development projects and practitioner publications

project from the 1980s. A recent project (2017) on storytelling and play undertaken by the Masterclass group of the Edinburgh Froebel Network is described in Part IV, Chapter 35. Chapter 24 in Part III shows the importance of reflecting on research about Froebel’s Mother Songs (Family Songs). There is little point for Froebelians in undertaking research which is not pondered for its practical possibilities acted upon in real life situations.

Two international development Froebelian projects in South Africa and Kolkata are presented, raising challenging issues. There are then writings emerging from practical Froebelian work from Froebelians living in South Africa, Japan and the UK.