Chapter 3: Early childhood education

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Introduction

The history of early childhood education in New Zealand differs from the history of schooling. Helen May, New Zealand's foremost historian of early childhood education, states that the history of early childhood education 'is mainly a history of women's activism, taking place in the experimental and the voluntary/charity sectors. Early childhood services have often been small scale and out of sight, in homes, houses and halls' (May, 1997, p. xi). She points out that the history and development of early childhood education is deeply entangled with ideas about child rearing, the role of women in society, child welfare, and family policies, and 'the role of the state in supporting and fostering that welfare' (May, 1997, p. xi). Therefore the history of early childhood education should take careful account of the wider social, cultural, and political context.

This chapter provides a historical overview of some of the political, social, philosophical, and cultural factors that have shaped the relationship between early childhood and education in New Zealand. It is not a comprehensive account of the sector's development. That history is available elsewhere. (See Carr & May, 2000; Farquhar, 2008; May, 2003). Instead, the chapter provides snapshots to argue that, throughout its history, the relationship between childhood and education has been shaped by social and political forces.

Political influences

'Political' refers to more than the state's involvement in early childhood education. Indeed, for most of the time the state played only a marginal role in the development of education for the youngest New Zealanders. Instead, 'political' refers to the way in which education of the young child has been entangled with social and moral agendas. The New Zealand Plunket Society provides an excellent illustration of the deep entanglement of political and governmental interests, scientific discourses, and changing ideas about motherhood. These forces came together in the Plunket Society's philosophy and practices, changing as the Society itself changed over the period of a century from its founding in 1907. By the end of the 20th century, the globalisation of education and an emphasis on life-long learning (Lingard &
Ozga, 2007), have emerged as major new influences in education, ones that promote the integration of the young child's education into 'mainstream' education.

From care to education

Early childhood education in the 21st century has found its place in the educational landscape of New Zealand. Over the last two decades, it has developed as an academic discipline in tertiary institutions. Internationally, New Zealand is regarded as a leader in early childhood curriculum development (Fleer, 2003) and early childhood education has become progressively more important to the state. In many ways, the integration of early childhood education into the 'mainstream' began in 1986 when administrative responsibility for the early childhood sector was transferred from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education (Carr & May, 2000). This shift signalled an emphasis on education rather than 'care' for young children, and raised the issue of funding and training. In contrast to schooling, early childhood services are diverse, some are run by voluntary groups of parents, and many of the services are privately owned.

Historically, the relationship between education and the state is complex. As Stephenson (2008) points out, education has always been seen as an instrument to address social problems. The first two chapters have introduced you to many of these problems. With its integration into mainstream education, early childhood education now experiences many of the social problems and issues that schools have traditionally faced. Governments' interest in early childhood education is evident, nationally and internationally, with public expenditure on early childhood education increasing significantly over the last decade (Moss & Petrie, 2002). Early childhood education is seen as a site for early intervention and for the maximisation of the child's potential from the earliest possible age.

In New Zealand, the political interest in early childhood education is shown in the current key policy document, The Early Childhood Strategic Plan (Ministry of Education, 2002). The document outlines a long-term framework for early childhood education. Commentators have noted that the framework intends to 'reduce the economic and social risk and is mainly aimed at educationally underachieving and underparticipating minorities, chiefly Maori, Pasifika and rural children' (Hedges & Nuttall, 2008, p. 79). Although the focus of the strategic plan on children of specific target groups 'at risk' is noteworthy, the existence of the strategic plan itself points towards increased government interest in all young children as learners.

Life-long learning is considered a key component of global education discourses (Dale, 2008). Policy, including the early childhood curriculum,
positions the young child as a learner from birth (Ministry of Education, 1996). Some international studies claim that a young child who does not participate in quality early childhood education is potentially a child at risk (Sylva, 2004) because the potential to develop dispositions for life-long learning may be lost. May (2001b) has identified a similar trend in New Zealand with its policy framework for early childhood education clearly in line with many western nation states (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

It is important to remember that a government focus on investment in early childhood education is fairly recent. Throughout the 19th and up to the mid-20th century, care and education for the very young in New Zealand was considered a private, rather than public matter (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994; May, 1997, 2001b) in contrast to primary and secondary education. (The history of governments’ involvement in primary schooling is the subject of Chapter One, while Chapter Two discusses the governments’ provision of secondary schooling.)

‘Taming the wild’: the first infant schools

The history of the very young at school is largely missing from education history texts (May, 2003). The very young were however, ‘always present in 19th century classrooms and schools; often in greater proportion than older children, who could more usefully assist adults in the work of survival’ (p. 3). It seems that the earliest infant school was founded by missionaries in Paihia as early as 1832 (May, 2003). Based on the British model, infant schools catered for a range of ages. Historical documents contain comments about an 18-month-old Maori child attending infant school (May, 2003). The purpose of these early infant schools was mainly to ‘tame’ Maori children. Missionaries were concerned with what they perceived as a lack of discipline in Maori child rearing. A diary entry from 1835 by a missionary gives an indication of how pre-colonial education of young Maori children may have looked: ‘Formerly a parent would never correct a child for anything it might do: it was allowed to run riot in all that was vile, and to have its own way in everything’ (May, 2003, p. 21). Early missionaries noted that child rearing was loving and caring with Maori children rarely physically chastised. May (2003) comments that this would have seemed over-indulgent to missionaries who were intent on ‘civilising’ the ‘wild Maori child’.

The early infant schools in New Zealand reflected British agendas for reform to establish social control over parts of the population that were deemed to be a risk. In Britain, moral reformers were concerned with working-class children who freely roamed the streets. Infant schools were part of a reform movement aimed at the poor who had moved to the cities to work in factories (Rose, 1990). It was hoped that infant schools would provide the
opportunity to teach the working-class mother how to discipline her children properly and how to confine them. In New Zealand, the purpose of missionary-run infant schools was also to provide Maori mothers with clear guidance. Infant schools were meant to, not only civilise the young Maori child, but the young child's mother as well.

**Antipodean Arcadia**

Colonial New Zealand was a hotbed for new ideas, including desires for an utopian Arcadia. It was also a harsh environment for early settlers and a challenging and unsettling time and place for Maori (Belich, 2001; King, 2003). British social reformers inspired desires for a better world and New Zealand held the promise that some of those dreams might be realised.

New Zealand became part of the British Empire in 1840. The New Zealand Company, a private British enterprise, was founded to actively promote colonisation as an escape from the ills of British society. The Company sought to attract a combination of 'hard working labourers and men with culture and capital as prospective immigrants for the quest for an antipodean Arcadia. In the event, it was mainly the former who emigrated' (May, 1997, p. 19).

'Arcadia' refers to the romantic notion that New Zealand offered the opportunity for new beginnings, far removed from industrialised Britain and its host of social and economic problems. Some British social reformers (Robert Owen for example) were inspired by the pedagogical theories of Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). These reformers, in turn, took their inspiration from Enlightenment philosophers, particularly Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788). Rousseau was interested in social renewal and the vision of an ideal civil society. He considered the child to be an embodiment of pure potential, and systematic education of the child as the tool to create a perfect human being. Rousseau also regarded nature to be the 'master of all life' (Baker, 2001). New Zealand's geographically isolated position made it a perfect setting for 'Arcadia'. It captured the desire for unspoiled nature as the setting for an ideal, pure and unspoiled society. Education was to be the tool for creating perfect citizens (May, 2003).

Infant schools in Britain attracted the attention of philanthropists such as Robert Owen. In 1816, Owen had established an infant school to combat child neglect, child labour, poverty, and disease - the by-products of urbanisation and industrialisation. The infant school for his workers was based on 'games, singing, and dancing, and outdoor playground, and natural objects for examination' (May, 1997, p. 17). The children in Owen's infant school learnt without the rod and without rote learning. The focus was on learning in a community, on exploration, and conversation between teacher
and children - all highly unorthodox ideas at the time. Owen’s model infant school inspired visions of utopia in the new colony. Some British reformers feared that social renewal was impossible in Britain and longed for a chance to put educational ideas into practice in New Zealand. However, these dreams were mostly shattered due to lack of funds and the harsh conditions of colonial life (King, 2003; May, 1997). May (2001a) points out that, even though the utopian dreams did not survive in colonial New Zealand, the desire for change and a better world through education of the young has had a lasting impact on early childhood education.

**Harsh realities: early childhood on the margin**

By the 1870s, the new colony looked less and less likely as a potential candidate for the establishment of the perfect society. Despite high hopes for a better life, European settlers soon realised that the reality of living in a settlers’ society in New Zealand was anything but easy. New colonies lacked social and political structures, as well as infrastructure. Social welfare in Britain with its class-based stratification depended on charitable systems and philanthropy. Immigrants to New Zealand were mostly hard-working labourers, which meant that the section of the population who potentially depended on charitable institutions increased rapidly. Those who provided charity, the ‘men with culture and capital’ (May, 1997, p. 19), were less inclined to leave familiar comforts in search of a better life in the colony. Some of the problems and ills of British industrial society began to reappear in the New Zealand context. In order to survive, most of the new settlers had to work hard, regardless of age, gender, and ability. The British middle-class ideal of the wife and mother who stayed at home to look after the household and the children was not an option for the majority of families (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994).

The harsh conditions of a settler society led to the frequent abandonment and destitution of women and children. There were no support systems to ease their hardship. Children roamed the streets, and there was palpable fear of pauperism and a permanent underclass developing. The welfare of abandoned children became a pressing social issue. The Education Act 1877 which made education compulsory, free, and secular for primary-age children helped address the situation (Cooper & Tangaere, 1994). However, it did not provide education and care for younger children.

**Orphanages, baby farms and kindergartens**

Some of the earliest institutions for childcare in colonial New Zealand were orphanages and baby farms. Unmarried mothers, as well as their married working-class counterparts, had to work to survive. This often left them with little choice but to resort to ‘baby farming’ arrangements where a ‘nurse’
would care for a number of babies. The practice of baby farming was
dangerous to the babies, and also, as in the case of the infamous Minnie Dean
who was accused of murdering a number of babies in her care and executed
in 1885, to the baby farmer (Hood, 1994). Baby farming was considered
scandalous. However, there was no consideration of the moral, economic,
and social factors that drove many women to provide and use baby farming.

Despite the necessity for many women to work, the middle-class attitude that
women should stay at home to look after their children prevailed. Attempts
to establish a childcare service for working mothers in the form of a crèche in
Dunedin in the 1870s failed. ‘Ten years later the Kindergarten Association
was established in the poorest area of Dunedin as an act of charity’ (Cooper
& Tangaere, 1994, p. 88). Other kindergartens followed. They were seen as a
‘child rescue’ and intervention strategy (May, 1997).

However, philosophy and education also played a part in the early history of
the Kindergarten Association. It became apparent that kindergartens needed
trained teachers to fulfil the task of educating mother and child, and Froebel­
trained kindergarten teachers were brought from London (May, 1997).
Kindergartens promoted the moral agendas of the age, but they also
embodied some of the early hopes of Enlightenment philosophy that found
their way to New Zealand through the idea of ‘Arcadia’ – the unspoiled,
blank canvas, ideal for social renewal.

By the late 19th century, the idea that education of the very young could
reform and ‘tame’ had metamorphosed from infant schools for Maori
children, run by white missionaries to tame and civilise the ‘wild, over­
indulged Maori child’, to kindergartens, organised by middle-class women
to reform their working-class contemporaries by introducing domestic
motherhood and rescuing the neglected working-class child. The overarching
theme was that ‘risky’ populations could be reformed by educating the very
young and those, mainly mothers, who were responsible for their care. It was
up to civil society, not the state, to undertake the task of social reform,
including generating funds. It is interesting to note that kindergartens
continued to exist, in relatively small numbers (32 in 1936), as charitable
organisations into the mid-20th century. Government funding, which enabled
increased provision, only happened after World War Two when mothers
increasingly began to see early childhood education as a worthwhile
experience for young children (May, 2001b). The remainder of the chapter
provides a snapshot of the changing understanding of early childhood as a
resource in the post-war period.
Plunket

British sociologist Alan Prout (2003b, 2005) argues that, in the 20th century, western societies ‘discovered’ childhood as a resource. Childhood came to stand for ‘the strategic identification of children as the point of intervention in and investment for the future. Through the activities of both the state and civil society, childhood has been turned into a project’ (Prout, 2003a, p. 2). Over the course of the 20th century, considerable resources were spent, not only in New Zealand, but in western nation states in general, on ‘the project of shaping children as future citizens and workers. All manner of services were developed to this end’ (Prout, 2003a, p. 1).

In New Zealand, the Plunket Society has been long associated with the idea that the young child is a valuable resource for the nation, one that warrants investment. The Society became a powerful institution promoting particular understandings of the child as future citizen. It also perpetuated the role of the mother as carer, one characterised by ideas of ‘scientific motherhood’ (Sullivan, 1995).

Through its practical application of medical and psychological knowledge of child development, the Plunket Society introduced the idea that those who cared for young children needed to be educated about child development and scientifically informed practices. Plunket reinforced the understanding that early childhood education and care are closely linked to motherhood. It also generated an understanding of the young child as pliable, but following predictable patterns of development, and in need of specialised guidance.

In the context of World War One’s nationalism, the Plunket Society sought to educate the wider public, and Pakeha mothers in particular, about child-rearing practices that would produce morally and physically sound New Zealanders and thus contribute to the building of a strong (future) nation (May, 1997). The society was founded in 1907 as part of a Western-world infant welfare movement that aimed to improve the survival and fitness of future citizens in the interests of national efficiency. The diagnosis of the problem and the solutions put forward were the same everywhere: mothers were ignorant of the correct methods of child-rearing and needed to be educated. Although the movement was medically inspired, in New Zealand’s case principally by Dr Frederic Truby King, it was generally organised and maintained by voluntary groups of women, sometimes with government support’ (Bryder, 2003, ix).

Maori health

The reasons for Plunket’s mainly Pakeha membership had historical roots. Maori health, including health care for babies and young children, had a long
heritage in the hospitals established by Governor Grey during the colonial period (Butterworth, 2006). These hospitals gave 'free admission to Maori patients, appointed native medical officers to treat Maori in their home areas and even instituted campaigns to vaccinate Maori' (p. 192). By 1866 there were 'some 29 appointees' (about 20 percent of registered medical practitioners). 'This service was to continue into the 20th century until the advent of social security in July 1939 made hospital services free and lowered the cost for doctor's services' (p, 192). In addition to the native medical officers, Butterworth acknowledges the role played by the Department of Education as 'another source of medicines and assistance'. Under the guidance of John Pope, the Inspector of Native Schools, teachers were encouraged to play a role in health care and it seems that a number of teachers actively did this, dispensing medicines provided by the government and looking after sick children. Some certainly nursed their charges during epidemics (p. 192).

The substantial increase in New Zealand's wealth from the new exports in meat, wool and dairy products meant that the Liberal Government (1891 - 1912) could afford to build the nation's infrastructure. The Department of Health was one of many government departments established during this period, along with the Department of Education, established in 1878. The Health Department 'was given responsibility for Maori health and was gradually given the power and resources to become effective' (p. 193). Butterworth describes the influence of the Maori Councils Act 1900 which established elected Maori councils and village committees with the responsibility to enforce sanitary bi-laws. Dr Maui Pomare began a 'vigorous campaign of health reform' (p. 193). 'The Maori infant mortality rate, which had dropped progressively from 400+ between 1844 and 1857 to 230 per thousand between 1901 and 11' (p.194) was still very high. According to Butterworth, this was the result of endemic contagious disease rather than epidemic disease. 'The drop continued and in the 1961-1965 period was at 40 per thousand births' (p. 196). 'In 1904 a Native Sanitary Inspectorate, drawn from local Maori leaders, was created to improve the villages. Subsidised doctors were continued and Public Health Nurses were appointed to work in Maori areas' (p. 196). 'By the 1930s, a new approach to Maori health provision meant that the whole health system was to be responsible for Maori health not a small inadequately funded group' (p. 196). Chapter Four takes this discussion further and describes the effects of unhygienic living conditions for both Maori and non-Maori in this period.

While Maori health care was fully established throughout the state system, the voluntary Plunket Society dealt mainly with non-Maori mothers and babies. Linda Bryder (2003), in her authoritative account of Plunket's history, refers to the complex relationship between Plunket and Maori (p. xv). 'The
department and Plunket reached an agreement early on that departmental, not Plunket, nurses would deal with Maori infant health. Maori women were entitled to use the Plunket clinics, though few did so' (p. xv).

Voluntarism

The relationship between the voluntary organisation, Plunket, and the state institution, the Ministry of Health, expresses a deeper theme running through New Zealand's early childhood care and education. That theme, which I consider in this chapter, is about how the relationship between childhood and education has been shaped by social and political factors. A major political factor concerns which organisations should be responsible for the delivery of early childhood care and education. Should voluntary organisations, such as Plunket, be responsible for the health and well-being of babies and young children? Should private business, such as child care centres, be responsible for the care and education of the very young? Or, is this the responsibility of the state through the Ministries of Health and Education? While the state took responsibility very early for the education of older children with the Education Act 1877 (see Chapter One of this volume), both the health and education of very young children has always been the site for the private-public debate.

It is an issue that has been debated throughout New Zealand's history and is still very much alive today. The increased provision of free early childhood education by the Government in 2007 brought the issue squarely back into prominence. On one side were those who believe that the state should provide early childhood care and education while on the other side were groups that regard the care and education of young children as a family responsibility that should be provided either by voluntary community groups or by fee-charging private businesses.

The issue was also keenly debated in the 1950s, culminating in the 1959 Committee of Inquiry into all infant and pre-school health services, and including Plunket. According to Harold Turbutt, the Director-General of Health, 'The department had always maintained that it was its duty to provide health supervision for the pre-school child, the incursion of the Plunket Society into this field being considered unnecessary and a duplication of State-provided services' (quoted in Bryder, 2003, p. 159). The other view was expressed in a New Zealand Herald article that maintained that New Zealanders' belief 'in the virtues of voluntarism was alive and well'. According to the article cited in Bryder (2003), 'the committee "attuned itself to the present-day mood of New Zealand", with self-help, self-reliance and voluntary work recognised as attributes to be fostered. It perceived the
public to the reaction against ‘excessive regimentation and dependence on the State’ (p. 162).

**Looking towards the future**

This chapter has focused on aspects of the changing relationship between early childhood and education over time to illustrate that, although understandings of childhood and education are not static but fluid, a continuous theme has been a concern with social control and population management. Over the past two centuries, the young child in New Zealand has variously been thought of as ‘wild and over-indulged’, ‘neglected’, ‘pliable and predictable’, ‘a future citizen’, ‘a project’, ‘a life long learner’. The 19th century saw childhood as a time when reform of ‘risky’ populations could take place through education and discipline of the young. Throughout the 20th century, understandings of the young child as a future citizen began to emerge.

In the 21st century, early childhood is increasingly seen as a time where intervention makes a significant difference to the individual, however, there is little agreement about whether the intervention should come from voluntary organisations or the government. Education becomes a tool to optimise the individual child’s potential. Within the global discourse of education, the young child who misses out on early education is increasingly seen as the child at risk of missing out on the first stepping stone towards becoming a life-long learner.

The expectation of participation in early childhood education has led to the identification of ‘at risk’ groups and the development of policies designed to assist these groups. The Strategic Plan describes young Maori and Pasifika learners as potentially ‘underachieving and underparticipating’ (Hedges & Nuttall, 2008). A new ‘at risk’ group in the Strategic Plan are rural children. This is a fascinating shift of focus when contrasted with the concerns over the participation of urban children in the mid-nineteenth century (Hendrick, 1997; May, 2001a). There is now concern over the provision of quality early childhood education in rural areas. At this stage, the new benchmark qualification requirement for early childhood teachers may lead to a serious lack of qualified teachers in rural areas because many teachers do not yet hold the qualification.

Although there is no doubt that quality early childhood education provides valuable learning experiences for children, the pressure for all children to participate is problematic. One issue is funding. Quality early childhood education comes at a cost. Many centres are privately owned and run for profit. Not-for-profit kindergartens provide sessional programmes, which do not cater for families in full-time employment. Government funding only
covers partial costs which makes early childhood education unaffordable for many families.

Finally, just as 19th century's concerns were on the social control of children in the interests of nation-building, the issue of children's agency is emerging as an influential idea in recent years. The push towards participation in early childhood education integrates young children into the education system before they go to school. For some children this means that they will spend much of their childhood in environments where adult-controlled routines and regulations structure their daily experiences. This raises questions over young children's ability to gain a sense of self that is not continuously mediated by adult control (Hallett & Prout, 2003; Prout, 2005). Cooper and Tangaere (1994) emphasised fifteen years ago that early childhood education needed critical thinkers to chart the path into the education system. The limitations of early childhood education are as important an area of study as is inquiry into how education benefits young children.

References


