

Early childhood education

Infant schools

After school ended on Monday, 10 August 1891, about forty female teachers from Brisbane and suburbs gathered at the Central State School in Adelaide Street. It was an historic moment - the commencement of the first training course for early childhood teachers in Queensland, under the guidance of Miss Mary Ann Agnew, the newly appointed Instructress in Kindergarten for the Department of Public Instruction.

During that first week, six different classes were formed with 227 primary school teachers. Each class met one day a week, after school or on Saturday morning, over a period of eight months. Under the guidance of Miss Agnew, they were introduced to the relatively new and strange educational ideas and implements advocated by Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the father of the 'kindergarten'. The key premise of the kindergarten technique was the belief that the child's moral-actional nature is good-active rather than bad-passive. The educational implications of this basic idea were described by Queensland's Inspector-General of schools, R.H. Roe, in 1909:

Froebel's school is a garden in which each child is a plant, possessing latent human powers instinct [animated] with life and awaiting the opportunity to unfold. His whole system seeks to aid and stimulate this unfolding. Teachers before Pestalozzi and Froebel sought to educate by addition from without...(rather than) to bring to full maturity the child's own nature by development of its inner powers.

Like Roe, Miss Agnew impressed upon her students the great delicacy and importance of this task. In particular, they were taught that the kindergarten methods, consisting of play and the Froebellian gifts and occupations, were not solely a means of keeping children 'occupied and amused'. Nor were they intended only to impart specific knowledge. They were:

to awaken sympathy between the child and his fellows and the world around him, to stimulate and exercise the imagination, and to divert into the right channels the natural desire for activity which all healthy children possess.

A greater contrast to the attitudes and methods of infant teachers before the 1890s could not be imagined! A transfer to infant teaching in earlier decades had been regarded with the same enthusiasm as a punitive transfer to the back blocks. Ambitious teachers, both male and female, avoided infant classes in favour of higher grades which were regarded as more intellectually demanding and consequently as a better 'proving ground' for teachers. Infant classes were left to the most inexperienced teachers. At Petrie Terrace Girls and Infants School in 1887, for example, the infants were divided into 13 drafts managed by seven pupil teachers and only three fully fledged assistant teachers. Drafts were often very large, and teachers resorted to military discipline.

In July 1891 the Department appointed Miss Agnew as Instructress in Kindergarten with the intention of implementing new methods and attitudes in infant schools. This followed a recommendation by the Queensland General Inspector after an 1889 study tour of schools in New South Wales (where Miss Elizabeth Banks was appointed Kindergarten Instructress in 1889), Victoria and South Australia. Back at their own schools, Miss Agnew's students were expected to act as Froebellian 'lighthouses'.

Unfortunately, most lacked the necessary equipment for implementing Froebel's building 'gifts' and such 'occupations' as paper folding, paper cutting and paper weaving, drawing, modelling and stick-laying. Though five schools (two in Brisbane, and one each in Charters Towers, Rockhampton and Townsville) were selected in 1893 to receive supplies of imported equipment and to act as model schools, the progress of kindergarten in infant schools was limited for many years by the problem of expense.

In 1893, the office of kindergarten instructress was abolished, probably due to the economic stringency of the early 1890s Depression. Progress was slow in the next decade and in 1903, when Miss Agnew was appointed a part-time inspector of kindergarten work, only seven schools had been equipped to use kindergarten methods. Without such equipment, schools were forbidden to attempt the work. Nevertheless, kindergarten work continued to expand in primary schools, and this early work also helped lay the basis for kindergarten and pre-schools after 1907.

Kindergartens and preschools

In 1907, the forerunner of the Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland was formed to establish day nurseries and free kindergarten schools for the children of the poor, train kindergarten teachers, and generally to promote interest in kindergarten work. By 1911, the Association had founded three kindergartens in Brisbane. This was a significant development, for where 'kindergarten' had previously denoted only a philosophy and method of early childhood education, used in some infant schools, it now came to be associated as well with a separate kind of school or institution. In the same year, 1911, the Creche and Kindergarten Association established its Kindergarten Training College, four years before the establishment of a general Teachers Training College in Queensland.

Creche and Kindergarten Association activities were heavily subsidised by the State. But at the same time, the Government was considering a rapid expansion of kindergarten activities in State schools. Miss Agnew's observations during a study tour in Europe in 1909 led her to conclude that Queensland's infant schools were 'not up to date, either in the matter of equipment, or generally speaking, in the methods of instruction'. On her advice, a Committee on Infant Schools consisting of Miss Agnew and two other prominent female teachers, was formed in 1910 to advise on Departmental policy. This Committee was active until 1913.

Though restricted to the larger schools, the number of schools using kindergarten methods grew rapidly during and after World War 1. In 1920, 99 schools were on the approved list, and five years later this number had grown to 127, including the 'Special schools for Backward Children' established in 1923. A significant policy change came in 1936 when it was decided to supply kindergarten equipment to one teacher schools in cases where the teachers had undergone training in kindergarten as part of their courses at the Teachers Training College.

Meanwhile, in the late 1930s, a conjunction of influences led the Government to give serious consideration to a direct involvement in the provision of preschool education, an area previously left solely to the Creche and Kindergarten Association. Though subsidised by the State, this Association raised most of its funds by street stalls, collections, raffles and donations. As the Association's kindergartens and day nurseries were created mainly for the

children of poor and working mothers, they had been a kind of social patronage, supported by a social elite with a passion for 'doing good works', and hovering on the periphery of real educational needs.

Not surprisingly, the Association's finances were never particularly healthy, a situation exacerbated by an aggressive building and up-dating program in the 1920s. As the Home Secretary commented in 1929 by that time 'the Association's finances were becoming difficult'. The Depression did not ease the situation. While constricting the finances available to the Association, the unemployment and hardship of the early 1930s increased the number of poor mothers seeking its services and underlined the social value of its work.

By 1937 the Association was reaching a crisis point, and a public debate was developing as to whether the Government should take over responsibility for its work. On the one hand, Archbishop Wand, Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, believed that 'if the vast amount necessary were done, it would be quite outside the Association's reach. It would be a happy day when the Government was ready to take over the work'. On the other hand, The Courier-Mail argued that 'even if the Government took large responsibility for this work, it could still make good use of voluntary assistance'. The argument for Government intervention was given impetus by the establishment of the first Lady Gowrie Centres financed by the Commonwealth Government, in 1939.

After World War II broke out in the Pacific in 1941, the peculiar military and social conditions of these years, like the Depression years of the 1930s, focused public attention sharply on both the social and the educational value of kindergartens. Admittedly, the public's main interest was in the provision of child-minding facilities, for as the General Secretary of the Brisbane Women's Club said in 1943:

'Many mothers now do war work and would be most thankful for a place where their children could be left in safety during the day; and many families have at least one member doing night shiftwork and find it difficult to keep their homes quiet while night workers get their necessary sleep during the day'.

However, this interest spilled over into true kindergartens as well, and was consolidated by a growing acceptance that 'national efficiency', the ability to win the war, depended on efficient education from the earliest possible age.

Faced by these increasing pressures, the State Government decided on a closer involvement in kindergarten activities. In August 1943, by agreement with the Creche and Kindergarten Association, the Association's kindergartens were handed over to a Pre-School Co-ordinating Committee with equal representation from the Government and the Association. As part of this co-operative scheme, the State Agreed to assist in the reopening of the Kindergarten Teachers College, which had closed in 1942, and to appoint to the Education Department a Superintendent of Preschool Education. In turn, the Committee was to act not only as a supervisory body for the kindergartens, but as an advisory body for the Government in creating a system of State preschool education.

Unfortunately, a Superintendent of Preschool Education was not appointed largely because of difficult conditions, including finance, created by the war. However, on the Committee's advice, it was decided to begin the reservation of land in anticipation that the end of the war would permit the establishment of State preschool centres. By mid-1945, at least 26 sites had been acquired or were in the process of acquisition throughout Queensland.

Because of the continuation of wartime shortages of building materials, labour and teachers in the post-war years, there was no rush by the Government to implement State preschool education. Available resources were fully absorbed in meeting the Department's existing commitments under the *Education Act*. By the time conditions improved, in the mid-1950s, the State was committed to a policy of rapid expansion of secondary education, a commitment which absorbed all surplus funds. Thus the policy adopted in 1942 of direct State involvement in preschool education, though never abandoned, was not implemented until 1972 when additional Commonwealth funds became available.

The policy announced in 1972 provided for free, non-compulsory preschool education for all 4- to 5-year-old children. The existing structure of independent kindergartens remained to serve younger children and the children of parents who preferred the independent system.

The first three State preschool centres were opened in January 1973. Over the next seven years, a massive building program was undertaken, such that in mid-1980 there were 357 preschool centres in Queensland. Moreover, in the same period, the Department used several means to extend preschool

education to areas with populations too small to warrant a centre. In 1974, for example, the Preschool Correspondence Program was inaugurated. The following year the SPAN playgroup concept was initiated to extend the education provided by the correspondence program. SPAN playgroups are small parent-run playgroups designed to provide isolated pre-schoolers with the opportunity to mix in groups. By 1976 there were over 40 of these groups throughout Queensland.

To provide for the preschool education of children in areas not large enough for a centre, but too large for a SPAN Playgroup, the Class 4 Schools Project was initiated in 1976. This involved the appointment of early childhood teachers (qualified to work at both preschool and lower primary levels) to small local primary schools. By mid-1980 131 schools were participating in this program.