

## **Abstract**

This study of primary sources and literature records life in New Zealand infant (or preparatory) classes during 1894 to 1904, an era with a growing regard for compulsory education yet no established syllabus for children in pre-Standard 1 classes. It describes the development of these classes, their teaching environment and the teaching methods used. The period is a one in which predominantly young teachers of children in these classes endeavoured to create, in the absence of formal curriculum guidelines, programmes of learning for their pupils. Teachers and inspectors often questioned the restricting environment and methods used in these lower classes, and called for reforms encompassing, for example, the child-centred ideas of educationalists like Pestalozzi. The study suggests that the more progressive ideas and practices developed by teachers of young children indicated a resistance to using teaching methods and maintaining a teaching environment unsuited to the needs of young children. This resistance helped fuel reforms in teaching and learning in early childhood and infant classes that gradually influenced teaching and learning in other areas of the education system.

**Key Words: history, early childhood, teaching methods, teaching environment**

**“WHEN I WAS FIVE I WAS JUST ALIVE”<sup>1</sup>**  
**TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS AND TEACHING METHODS IN**  
**NEW ZEALAND INFANT CLASSES 1894 TO 1904<sup>2</sup>**

**INTRODUCTION**

The influence of the teaching environment on how teachers teach and learners learn and, conversely, the influence of teaching methods on children’s learning have always been, to greater or lesser extent, integral to the development and implementation of school programmes. From the earliest days of formalised education, theories about how, why and what teachers should teach and learners should learn have influenced the physical and social environment of the classroom and teaching methods. This interplay is evident in primary sources on conditions in infant classes for five- to seven-year-olds during New Zealand’s developing education system in the latter part of the 19th century, and is worth studying for two main reasons.

First, until recently, there was little in the published literature on what school life was like at this time for children during their early school years in New Zealand. However, it should be noted that work by Helen May (2005) is a significant step towards remedying this situation. The evidence that is available suggests that children who attended school at five years of age could have felt “just alive” as they entered this new stage in their life. They would have found that schooling was something to be taken seriously, that teachers expected them to behave and work like adults, and that discipline and expectations were based on a limited understanding of children. Second, many of the progressive learning environments and teaching attitudes and practices that eventually made their way into the compulsory education sector in the late 19th century were initially evident in infant classes. The child-centred approach that grew out of the Romantic period partly because of a changing social conscience and partly because of the writings of Rousseau and the practices of Pestalozzi and Froebel (May, 1997) contrasted sharply with the widely accepted knowledge-based and teacher-directed teaching methods of the time. “The Romantic Movement was a reaction against this attitude of mind, and therefore emphasised everything which the eighteenth century undervalued, personal involvement, emotional expression, intuition rather than cool reason” (Wardle,

---

<sup>1</sup> Title taken from A. A. Milne ‘Now we are six’.

<sup>2</sup> This article was developed from a postgraduate research project completed as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Education at the University of Canterbury.

1970, p. 5). The non-compulsory infant sector seemed to have greater freedom than other sectors of the education system to try methods and strategies, especially those that were more child centred in orientation. The more progressive teachers and inspectors of the late 1890s began to question the advisability of using in infant classes the same methods of tuition used with older children, and to resist this 'downward pressure' of the prescribed primary school curriculum, teaching methods and teaching environment.

The 1877 Education Act stated that while parents were obliged to send their children to primary school between ages seven to 13, free access would be available for five- to 15-year-olds. During the 1890s, as compulsory education took greater hold throughout New Zealand, school rolls increased markedly, despite a declining birth rate (McGeorge, 1983), and increasing numbers of children outside the compulsory age range began to attend school. "In 1891, 82 per cent of five- to fifteen-year-olds were at school; in 1916 it was 90 per cent" (McGeorge, 1983, p. 17).

This article accordingly endeavours to provide, primarily from primary documentation, a descriptive account of the conditions under which very young children learned and their teachers taught. It also demonstrates how some of their teachers, with support from some inspectors, sought change to the classroom teaching environment and the way they taught, both as an outcome of their own reflections on their teaching practice and their reading or knowledge of the views of other educators. The source material for this article derives mainly from records in the *Appendices to the Journals to the House of Representatives (AJHR)* 1894–1905. The *AJHR* detail school experiences from the perspectives of school inspectors from throughout New Zealand. However, some accounts of how the children viewed their earliest school years have been gleaned from biographical accounts, mainly from the Canterbury region, given by these children when well into adulthood. It is recognised that such accounts tend to be hazy because of relying on the biographers' memories of many years back.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF INFANT CLASSES**

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Western world, there was a growing recognition within society that children's welfare and education should receive more attention. Education, a number of theorists and commentators surmised, could help overcome poverty and ignorance so that individuals could have more control over shaping their lives and their future. Education was also seen as a means of socialising children into their communities. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), for example, proposed that children were born with natural goodness and should be educated in a non-restrictive environment to encourage independence and freedom. Robert Owen (1771–1858) saw education of the young as a pathway to a positive life so established schools for his workers' children. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) was an advocate for the poor.

His ideas for education focused on encouraging a warm relationship between teacher and the child so that learning through self-activity and discovery could occur in an emotionally secure environment. Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) developed the idea of a kindergarten where a young child could grow and develop through appropriate activity and play experiences (May, 1997). These pioneer educators wanted to see children involved in an education that recognised childhood as a significant stage to be acknowledged and nurtured and instead of seeing education as preparation for adult life. This tension between new ideas of how learning occurs within the relatively newly recognised stage of childhood and the traditional teacher-directed knowledge learning that prepares the child for adulthood and employment were evident as teachers and inspectors in New Zealand developed infant class programmes.

The increase in enrolment outside the compulsory age bracket naturally saw an expansion in the numbers of children in infant classes (also known as preparatory classes), intended for children five to seven years of age. In 1894, the school roll for New Zealand had 31,778 pupils (or 25% of the total school roll) ages five years to under eight in preparatory classes (Table 1). Of these pupils, 14,528 were seven to eight years of age (Table 2). By 1904, the corresponding figures were 37,897 (28%), with 15,537 or 11.5% of these pupils in the seven- to eight-year-old age bracket.

**Table 1 Pupils in preparatory classes throughout New Zealand, 1894–1904**

Year	Boys	Girls	Totals	Percentage of total school roll
1894	16,887	14,891	31,778	24.96
1895	17,222	15,165	32,387	24.94
1896	17,335	15,306	32,641	24.91
1897	17,361	15,134	32,495	24.58
1898	17,375	14,893	32,268	24.52
1899	17,461	15,490	32,951	25.09
1900	18,034	15,965	33,999	26.00
1901	18,645	16,531	35,176	26.78
1902	18,897	16,638	35,535	26.87
1903	19,528	17,284	36,812	27.56
1904	20,100	17,797	37,897	27.97

Source: *AJHR*, 1894–1904

**Table 2 Age and gender of pupils in preparatory classes throughout New Zealand, 1894 and 1904**

	Five years and under six		Six years and under seven		Seven years and under eight	
	1894	1904	1894	1904	1894	1904
Boys	4,930	5,482	6,725	7,270	7,543	8,066
Girls	4,538	5,025	6,287	6,725	6,985	7,471
Total	9,468	10,507	13,012	13,995	14,528	15,537
Percentage of roll at each age	7.4	7.8	10.2	10.3	11.5	11.5

**Source:** *AJHR*, 1894 and 1904

There were various reasons for the increase in numbers. Compulsory school attendance was confirming the benefits of education to parents, who began entering their children from ages five and six rather than seven, while various other government measures were cutting off loopholes that had seen parents choosing not to send their children to school or to withdraw them for periods of time. For example, the Factory Act 1894 and subsequent labour laws prohibiting the employment of children under 14 years of age in factories, mines and shops meant it was no longer so easy for parents to choose the extra income children could bring to their families over the education the children could acquire in state schools. Also, the School Attendance Act 1894 transferred the mandate to enforce attendance during the compulsory years from the local school committees to education boards, a move that gave truant officers appointed by the boards considerably more power than they had previously. . However, this may have been less successful amongst the large rural population where the seasonal activities of lambing and haymaking drew children out of school for extended periods, in order to assist the family on the farm. Butchers (1930) noted that although the enforcement elements of the legislation were flawed, they did help improve school attendance.

The fact that children older than seven years of age were also evident in the preparatory classes is accounted for not only by some children not entering school until the compulsory age, but also because the Inspectorate held back others from progressing into Standard 1. Until 1899, children could not progress from standard to standard until a school inspector had examined them and pronounced them ready to do so. Standard 1 was the first recognised level of primary schooling accounted for in the legislation. If teachers thought a child unlikely to pass at the end of Standard 1 because of “being a

dullard, irregular attendance or being Māori”, (*AJHR* 1896, E-1b, p15), they often contrived to hold the child back in the infants until a Standard 1 pass looked more likely. Pass rates gave teachers their standing in the community and, if positive, enhanced promotion opportunities. However, this situation created increasing disquiet. Mr H. Hill, the inspector for Hawkes Bay in 1899, for example, expressed concern that some children who started school at aged five could spend four years in the infants: “Four years are thus spent in preparation work. Under proper regulations, what might not those four years be made to produce?” (*AJHR*, 1899, E-1b, p. 22).

While the children waited in the preparatory classes to reach the required level of knowledge sufficient to earn them progression into Standard 1, their teachers developed a programme of instruction for them, as there was no prescribed syllabus for this level. Infant teachers drew their methods and content from manuals for primary schools such as that by Garlick (1898), writing in Britain, and Farnie (c. 1890), writing in New Zealand, as well as from guidelines on subjects suitable for preparation for Standard 1 published in an 1878 edition of the *New Zealand Gazette*. The Rev. W. J. Habens, who was Inspector-General of Schools from 1878 to 1899, offered little in the way of reform within the schools that would allow for better conditions and more extensive training for teachers (Campbell, 1941). Such developments might have hastened a better classroom environment for the children.

The appointment of George Hogben as Inspector-General in 1899 saw significant changes to how children progressed out of Standard 1. One of Hogben’s first measures was to give, in 1899, head teachers of schools more responsibility for examining children and pronouncing them ready to move out of Standard 1, although the inspectors could still over-ride the teachers’ decisions. This change meant that decisions could be made by those who knew the child and not according to an examination held on one day of the year. As children began to move more easily through the standards, and increasingly in same-age cohorts, the numbers of older children in the infants began to dwindle, and the infant classes assumed sizes that teachers could more easily manage and so experiment with new ways of structuring the teaching environment and teaching the children.

Pressure for change and innovation in the education of young New Zealand children was thus related to a greater understanding and acceptance by some teachers and government officials (notably inspectors) to new, alternative approaches to teaching and learning from Europe and Britain, changing social attitudes towards children and the meaning of childhood, a reforming approach by a less conservative Inspector-General, and changes to legislation. Although the period under study marked a new era in New Zealand education, it took time for the changes to influence classroom practice.

## **LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The intention of the infant classes was to prepare children for formal education within the compulsory education prescribed for Standards 1 to 6. This preparation included developing good habits of learning, attention, work and obedient behaviour. Inspectors' reports from the 1890s were encouraging of the work attempted in the infant classes, often noting that they were the most important area of the school because they enabled children to obtain the basic knowledge and skills upon which to build the rest of their education. We may ask how these "little ones" or "babies" fared in the lower classes and how conducive the learning environment was to their all-round development. In the early part of the period under consideration, accounts in the inspectors' reports indicate that class sizes were large, rooms crowded and often poorly structured and provisioned, and teachers often inexperienced. The answers, therefore, to both questions are, from our modern perspective, "not very well" and "not very". An Otago inspector commented that there was little pleasure in infant school life except pleasing the teacher and that the children should be involved in activities that required them to be doing instead of sitting, listening and writing (*AJHR.*, 1897, E-1b, p.41).

In general, schools of this era were still being run along military lines so that teachers could keep control of the large numbers in their charge. Classes of 50 or more pupils were common and often with a range of levels in the one room. Discipline was firm and at times unreasonable, but teachers were often inexperienced pupil-teachers and had few supports, little training and professional development, and limited guidance to develop effective teaching methods. The developmental needs of the child were generally poorly understood or able to be acknowledged in the restricted physical environment in the classroom. However, with advancements and ideas on educating the whole child from the Inspector-General, George Hogben, along with an increasing coterie of teachers of like mind who tried to have their ideas accepted by the wider community, conditions for these young children became brighter.

A young Ashburton boy, Huia Beaumont, started Hampstead School, Ashburton, in 1906 and later became a notable primary teacher. Although this date is two years beyond the time under consideration, his description of the classroom matches other pictures evident from reading about infant education at the turn of the century.

What a revelation that room was to a new five year old. Long desks with long forms behind them for those pupils on the way to Standard One, and at the near end, for the beginners, a stage of stairs with steps wide enough to accommodate young bottoms. This, I learned, was the Gallery. We were arranged on this according

to our daily achievement. On one day I held fourth to top place. . . . The plastered wall at the beginners' end was covered with a garish array of coloured pictures which proved a source of considerable interest during the pauses in our lessons when we sat with demurely folded arms (Beaumont, 1992, pp. 33–34).

Goodyear (1995) interviewed 33 adults in the Otago and Southland regions of New Zealand who were pupils at the turn of the century, and they, too, commented on the layout of the rooms. Young children were required to sit at long tables on long forms with no back, with a “big” pupil at the end. Children who finished their work before the other children often could not move away from their table to go onto another activity, but had to sit and wait until everyone had completed the task. When all the children were finished, there was a correct way for them to stand and sit. “The desks,” according to one of Goodyear’s (1995, p. 35) interviewees, “were fixtures and if we were writing they would [say] ‘forms in one, two, three.’ And they’d stand out at one, lift at two and sit down at three. The forms were brought in too so that we could sit near the desks.”

Some teachers also found these forms very restricting and pleaded for more flexible seating for the infants so that those children who finished earlier could move onto another activity. Certain inspectors also expressed concern in their reports at the conditions for these infant children, saying that a large part of their day was spent in listless activity. They suggested that children should not be kept in their seats all day but be allowed to play freely outside or move easily to other activities when their lessons were complete (*AJHR*, 1895, E-1b, p. 22). Remembering her years at school during the period under consideration, Howes (c. 1919) wrote of one teacher who persistently asked for improvement to the classroom environment in which she and her infants were expected to work. She described the room as like a prison with high windows so that the children could not see out and so be distracted from their work. The children, she said, needed to see the sky and the trees. When her request was not granted, she took the matter into her own hands and levered the windows open to let in the sunshine and fresh air. Next she tackled a garden for the children, so that, as she explained, they could appreciate beauty and learn about nature. While the garden much concerned the local school committee secretary, the teacher’s aim here reflected the ideas of the Romantic period educators such as Friedrich Froebel who developed the idea of young children being nurtured and stressed the importance of children learning through first-hand, relevant experience (Fletcher & Walton, 1912). The teacher’s next request of the secretary of the South Valley School Committee was as follows:

Every child should have its own little chair. . . . It should be strong and light, so that he can carry it out into the fresh air for lessons, or hang it on the wall when a clear floor is needed for games. We have no right to herd

the children into those dreadful benches, the clean with the unclean. We have no right to keep them cramped for long hours behind those wicked desks. They need movement (Howes, *c.* 1919, pp. 11–12).

The teacher also suggested that the benches would make “excellent firewood”. “Waste and levity!” thought the secretary.

Firewood would have been an essential item on the winter energy supplies list. Classrooms were often cold. Howes (*c.* 1919, p. 59) reports that the temperature in one infant room dropping the mercury to 35 degrees Fahrenheit—only three degrees above freezing. Chilblains and winter illnesses must have abounded in such cramped and overcrowded rooms.

The mistress stood in front of her infants and sighed despairingly, and her sigh made a little white fog in the air, for the morning was the most frozen of all recent mornings. . . . They sat huddled in their desks with their overcoats on, knees and hands and faces blue with cold. They looked at her with pathetic eyes, and told her they were cold, and she didn’t know what to do with them. That was why she sighed (Howes. *c.* 1919, p. 57).

She was later supplied with some oil heaters for her infants. One inspector, writing his report after visiting Coalgate School in April 1899, wrote that rain was falling through the infant room roof and that there were three classes but only one blackboard (Canterbury Education Board records, 1891–1907). Summertime also brought its share of unpleasantness after the mud, rain, floods and cold of the winter. Toilets were cleaned and emptied less often than was desirable, and the odours that permeated the classroom were particularly unpleasant for a child positioned near doors or a wall adjacent to the toilets.

Limited resources would have had a large impact on methods used. The teacher and pupils could expect to have a range of essential equipment in the classroom. The blackboard, chalk and pointer were necessary for all pupils to watch closely and chant the lesson material together as a class. There would be some reading material, but often only one reader for each child to work through for the year. Children did much of their written work on slates. According to Garlick (1898), slates were economical when compared to paper costs, were more easily managed in a classroom situation, allowed progress to be steady, and let the child gain control of the pencil before the pen. However, cleaning them was difficult. Some classrooms had charts on display in the classroom to help the reading programme, a few teacher-made resources, and materials for the children to manipulate as they busied themselves with some of the occupations suggested by Froebel to develop manual skills (Fletcher & Walton, 1912). The teachers at Mt. Cook Infant School and Thorndon Infant School, both in Wellington, were considered by inspectors to be delivering well-organised programmes, including basket work, action songs and other

occupations, that gave the school a healthy, bright atmosphere (*AJHR*, 1895, E-1b, p. 14). The classroom furniture usually consisted of a teacher's table and chair, and forms and benches for the children.

Teachers of the infants were nearly always women, who were often assisted by pupil-teachers in larger schools. The infant class level was considered an important venue for training pupil-teachers in the principles of teaching before they advanced their training at a teachers' college. The nature of the relationship that both pupil-teachers and teachers had with their charges varied, but reports from inspectors suggest that all teachers were encouraged to work with the children in a cordial and natural manner. Howes (*c.* 1919) wrote of one such teacher who tried to improve her relationship with pupils by burning the strap, even though corporal punishment was acknowledged as an ensured method of keeping large groups in reasonable order. This teacher had over 100 infants whom she managed with the help of pupil-teachers. She also considered that lessons needed to be made as interesting as possible to keep children motivated instead of giving them opportunity to misbehave. This was certainly a forward-thinking teacher who made a brave attempt to create and encourage a love of learning and not a fear of the strap, despite such large classes.

There sat her seventy children, and a pupil teacher's class of forty-five, all crammed behind wooden barriers, as if they were so many little malefactors put into the stocks. The place was full of desks; there was no room for movement, and the child who finished his set work first could never move to find something else to do without disturbing all those around him. At every movement of the one class, every word of the one teacher disturbed the other class and the other teacher. . . . "No occupations can be successful at desks. I am assured of that now." . . . While waiting for the new furniture, she had been busy devising occupations suitable to the new conditions. Now the infants found school a fascinating place. There were all kinds of things to do, and when you had finished one you could move quietly round to another. . . . There was so much to do and so much of interest that nobody had time to be naughty (Howes, *c.* 1919, pp. 35–36).

Howes (*c.* 1919) also tells the story of Jimmy, who went through the "babies". When Jimmy started school, he was in an infant group of 240 pupils occupying three rooms. However, it became evident that a fourth room would be needed to teach the youngest, so the cloakroom became their room.

Jimmy knew those porches well, for he had been through the "babies". On windy days the dust swirled in on you, on cold days a draught like a knife came in on your feet from the broken rift under the outer door, on stormy days the steamy smell from wet coats and hats, mingling with the breath of babies in the dank atmosphere made you feel choky and ill (Howes, *c.* 1919, p. 49).

Goodyear's (1995) research on children and schooling in Otago at the turn of the century indicates the variability in learning conditions from school to school and also in children's relationships with their teachers. One man Goodyear interviewed told her that as a very young boy he was strapped on his first morning at school so went home at playtime, not to return for a year. However, another person she interviewed, who attended a different school, said that as a young pupil she held her teacher in great affection and considered that her teacher possibly gave her more love than her own mother. Although reports on classroom environments vary, it appears that many teachers and inspectors were encouraging of attempts to make the child's school day more suited to children's needs and interests.

## **TEACHING METHODS**

With very limited teacher training and little acknowledgement of children's individual needs, teachers were guided on how to teach from the aforementioned method manuals from Britain and New Zealand (Farnie, c.1890; Garlick, 1898). These gave guidance on administration, school economy, discipline, teaching, lesson planning and subject content. Manuals such as these appear to have been used widely as part of teacher training and practice in New Zealand classrooms, given that the inspectors' reports show that approaches to teaching throughout the country were reasonably consistent.

Gwen Somerset (1988), one of the key founders of the New Zealand Playcentre movement, tells of the anguish her father experienced when it was time for the annual inspection. He was headmaster at Amberley School, North Canterbury, around 1900. Her account strongly indicates the types of teaching method expected of teachers during the 1890s and early 1900s. Somerset's father, a man of progressive methods in education, was always fearful that the inspector would not accept his methods, thus leaving him without a job.

To him, education was not merely a fact finding routine, but the fulfilment of each child's inborn capacity and the means through which everyone could "reach for the stars". Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi stressed activity, imagination and interest while Carlyle emphasised the joy of work. His own love of literature, music and natural growing things was at variance with the accepted "school method" of the day—a method that relied heavily on the strap. It flew up and down, back and forth, in most schools all day and every day, recommended by Inspectors and praised by parents and colleagues. A "good" teacher looking for promotion was firm and just, but stood no nonsense. Results mattered, not the lives of children. "Father Pestalozzi might never have existed", he sadly once said to me (Somerset, 1988, pp. 25–26).

As a teacher of the infant classes at Elmwood School, Christchurch, in 1914, Somerset continued to create a positive learning environment by trying to protect her “dear little scholars” from harsh discipline methods used.

I had learned a lot in a year about teaching, about punishment, about children’s desire to communicate, to express their true feelings, to work actively, to discover things for themselves in their own way. . . . My class had little free time but once a week the Infant Mistress took sewing with Standard Six—a long way off in the old building. We had freedom to laugh, play, act, construct as we would like—a short hour only—but planned over the whole week to use every moment to please ourselves (Somerset, 1988, pp. 106–107).

The fact that many inspectors, as evidenced in their reports, could not understand how the children could be so successful in their learning when they were encouraged to work individually and according to their individual needs gives some indication of how long the teaching methods evident in her father’s time held influence. ‘We proceed as if the child’s experience were equal to our own, and wonder why what is so simple to us is a matter of such difficulty to him’ (*AJHR*, 1898, E-1b, p. 50).

They also had to allow for the composite nature and various learning levels of such large numbers of children. Many teachers in sole-charge schools had to handle all six levels of the primary school as well as the infants. Teachers were expected to work with limited resources and apparatus, with some buying out of their own pocket if the school board was unable to pay or did not see it within their sphere of responsibility to do so. The teaching methods that teachers used needed to suit the often over-crowded conditions in schools that Pestalozzi decried. The five-year-old infant class child may well have felt “just alive” as the restrictive and directive school environment became a reality.

And after they have enjoyed this happiness of sensuous life for five whole years, we make all nature around them vanish from before their eyes; tyrannically stop the delightful course of their unrestrained freedom, pen them up like sheep, whole flocks huddled together, in stinking rooms; pitilessly chain them for hours, days, weeks, months, years, to the contemplation of unattractive and monotonous letters (and contrasted to their former condition), to a maddening course of life (Pestalozzi, cited in Gutek, 1968, pp. 101–102).

Methods of teaching reading had to be compatible with the reading material available. This material required teachers to

teach using the alphabet, phonics and the “look and say” method. As noted earlier, children generally learnt from just one reader each year or maybe two if they were lucky, as well as from wall charts, blackboard notations and some teacher-made resources. Many children also learnt reading by memory because if they were in a composite class they would hear the more advanced children read aloud many times and so become very familiar with the text before it came into their hands. Teachers also read passages aloud and asked the children to repeat the passage by reading it from their own reader. Repetition encouraged memorisation. Reading was also developed by teaching two-letter words in simple readers such as “Is my ox to go in as we go by?”, then progressing on to more complex words and sentences. *The Imperial Readers: First Primer* (1899) was a commonly used reader of this sort. The children practised writing every day on slates. From lines, they progressed to hooks and links so that a cursive style could develop (Garlick, 1898).

Drawing involved the children copying simple drawings and symmetrical drawings using the lines on their slates. Object lessons allowed some study of the natural world through the senses. Farnie’s manual (1890) suggested as appropriate subjects, a cat, dog, cow or mouse, minerals such as salt, and plants such as a daisy, with the focus on each being its origins, its use to man, and any special properties or religious or moral lesson that could be attached to it. Singing and drill were regular activities on the timetable. Singing was often “joyful” and drill was run on military lines and important for discipline. The teaching of arithmetic relied mainly on rote learning. Chanting of times-tables and figure-writing prevailed, but where the children were able to manipulate the materials such as kindergarten sticks and ball frames, their understanding of addition and multiplication appeared to be enhanced. (Farnie, 1890)

Discipline must have been difficult for teachers working in overcrowded and poorly resourced classrooms, and many seemed to use fear, rather than exciting interest, as a means to motivate learning. While the strap was commonly used, some teachers did endeavour to avoid corporal punishment by using other ways of correcting perceived misdemeanours. Rhoda Barr (1953, p. 2), for instance, remembered from her time as a young child at an Oamaru school in the 1890s that discipline was “far from severe and consisted of standing in corners or on seats—without fidgeting—wearing a dunce’s cap”. Inspectors often found the infant children to be too serious in school, which possibly was because of their fear of not pleasing the teacher as well as not being interested in or seeing any relevance in the lesson material.

## **NEW TRENDS AND PRACTICES**

The economic recession during the 1890s along with the increasing demands of a society beginning to appreciate the importance of a basic education for their children saw school rolls expanding, with the infant classes coming under

particular pressure. As explained earlier, not only were parents, for various reasons, being encouraged to send their children along to school before the compulsory age of seven but also children were being held back in these classes because it was feared that they might not pass the inspectors' examination at the end of Standard 1. These developments put considerable pressure on school resources, such as buildings and teaching materials, and saw teachers having to employ teaching methods that allowed them to cope with large numbers of children in composite classes. In 1895, for example, the inspector visiting Akaroa commented that the numbers of students in the school there were too large to be able to give the children the care and attention they needed (Canterbury Education Board records, 1891–1907).

However, throughout the country, the inspectors' reports also showed that conditions in the infant classes were now coming under particular scrutiny, perhaps because all but the most hard-hearted saw them as unacceptable for such young children and because the progressive ideas about education that were beginning to appear in New Zealand tended to focus on the early years of schooling. Although the inspectors of the time generally considered the infant classes to be well run and the children coping with the poor conditions, some began commenting in their reports that these conditions and the methods teachers had to employ to operate within them made for learning that was neither interesting nor relevant to the children's young lives. Some also observed that the dearth of attention that the little ones received from their teachers, even in the smaller schools, was inadequate for their good progress.

Teachers, too, although struggling with often limited training, became increasingly evident at this time as a dedicated group of people keen to take on new methods that would benefit the young children. Those teachers who taught at the infant level began to discover the progressive ideas of Froebel and Pestalozzi, which had become more accessible and apparent with the climate of educational reform brought in by Inspector-General of Education George Hogben from 1899 on. As the inspectors' reports and teacher books of the period show, some teachers started to structure their classroom environments and modify their teaching methods in ways that allowed them to follow their own beliefs that infants needed active learning opportunities. They, and other teachers besides, also began to agitate to the inspectorate for changes to the conditions under which young children were taught and learned.

Such comments and other initiatives on the part of some inspectors and infant teachers doubtless helped create a climate conducive to George Hogben introducing in 1904 a new syllabus for primary schools that included the infant classes. This development and the content of the syllabus accorded with the Inspector-General's belief that teachers and pupils in the lower levels of the education system should be freed as much as possible from the restrictions of inspection and examination

and that learning should be grounded learning in real-life experiences:

We must believe with Froebel and others of the most enlightened of the world's educators, that the child will learn best, not so much by reading about things in books as by doing; that is, exercising his natural activities by making things, by observing and testing things for himself; and then afterwards by reasoning about them and expressing his thoughts about them (Hogben, 1904, quoted in Ewing, 1970, p. 93).

Hogben's extension of the syllabus to infant classes helped change the course of New Zealand education because it formally acknowledged for the first time the importance of recognising the special nature of the young child and the importance of involvement in self-activity. The voices of the pioneer educators had influenced the open-mindedness of an Inspector-General who, because of his position, had a mandate to make nationwide changes. As Campbell (1941, p. 6), tracing the course of New Zealand education for the Department of Internal Affairs' New Zealand Centennial Surveys Series, observed: "Nowhere else in the world, perhaps, was there a more serious attempt to embody the best theory of the time in an official syllabus."

### **ECHOES OF THE PAST TODAY**

The 1890s in New Zealand saw the beginnings of a more child-centred education which recognised that children need more freedom within the learning environment to be involved in hands-on, stimulating activity. This time of increased growth in the infant classes also made teachers and administrators more aware of the importance that education received at this level held for children's future learning. Although classroom buildings, learning and teaching resources and training were limited, teachers often strived to provide a sound education for young New Zealand children. Many worked within the physical restraints of the learning environment to create a learner-friendly atmosphere using methods that were less militaristic. They, with support from various inspectors, became enthusiastic about trying new teaching approaches, having seen first hand that traditional methods did not work well with young children. The more they came to understand, either through their own observation or reading of new pedagogies, of how young children learn, the more they resisted methods designed for use with older children. This resistance helped facilitate the development of a syllabus better suited to the needs of young children.

This questioning of the type of classroom environment and teaching methods best suited to young children has continued to the present day. The development of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1993) recognises that all students need

an education that is better suited to the needs of the individual, the community and the nation.

The school curriculum will be sufficiently flexible to respond to each student's learning needs, to new understanding of the different ways in which people learn, to changing social and economic conditions to national needs, and to the requirements and expectations of the local communities. (p.6)

Corrie (cited in Cullen, 2003) argues that early childhood teachers have continued to resist the “downward push” from the school curriculum over the decades, and that it is only relatively recently that this resistance has seen the development of curricula designed specifically for the early childhood sector rather than being an “add on” or supplementary to the primary school curriculum. In 1996, the early childhood sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand saw the development of its own curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and in 2004, it witnessed publication of *Kei Tua o te pae Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004). The latter includes exemplars of methods of assessment that acknowledge holistic development and the sociocultural context of the child. According to Carr and May (Te One, cited in Nuttall, 2003, p. 22), *Te Whāriki* has been developed “as much to protect the interests of children before school as . . . to promote and define curriculum for early childhood education.” Both *Te Whāriki* and *Kei Tua o te pae* address the particular needs of young children and provide models that are influencing, or likely to influence, teaching, learning and assessment for older children. Acclaim for *Te Whāriki* is not limited to those from an early childhood education perspective. Penetito (cited in Keesing-Styles, 2002, p. 115) claims that “*Te Whāriki* has pushed the boundaries out in what counts as education.” Those teachers and inspectors of the late 1890s who pioneered new developments in how very young children were taught and sought changes to the environment within which they were taught would likely have welcomed similar approbation of their efforts.

## References

- Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR) 1894–1905*. Wellington: Government Printer.
- Barr, J. R. (1953). *Within the sound of the bell*. Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.
- Beaumont, H. W. (1992). *Long time passing: The life story of down-to-earth Beauie*. Christchurch: Richmond Village Bookshop.
- Butchers, A. G. (1930). *Education in New Zealand*. Dunedin: Coulls Somerville Wilkie.
- Campbell, A. E. (1941). *Educating New Zealand*. Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs.

- Canterbury Education Board records, 154/70, item 180 Teachers/Record Book 1891–1907. Manuscripts collection, Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Cullen, J. (2003). The challenge of Te Whāriki: Catalyst for change? In J. Nuttall (Ed.), *Weaving Te Whāriki. Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document in theory and practice* (pp.269-296); Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Ewing, J. (1970). *Development of the New Zealand Primary School Curriculum, 1877–1970*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Farnie, T. C. (c. 1890). *Manual of school method*. Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.
- Fletcher, S. S. F., & Walton, J. (1912). *Froebel's chief writings on education*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Garlick, A.H. (1898). *A new manual of method*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Goodyear, R. (1995). Has the bell rung yet? Children and schooling in Otago, 1900–1920. *History of Education Review*, 20(1), 1995.
- Guttek, G. L. (1968). *Pestalozzi and education*. New York: Random House.
- Howes, E. (c. 1919). *Tales out of school*. Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.
- Keesing-Styles, L. (2002). A critical pedagogy of early childhood education: The Aotearoa/New Zealand context. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 5, 109–122.
- McGeorge, C. (1983). School attendance and child labour, 1890–1914. *Historical News*, May, 17–20.
- May, H. (1997). *The discovery of early childhood*. Wellington: Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books with New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- May, H. (2005). *School beginnings: A 19th century colonial story*. Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Ministry of Education. (1993). *The New Zealand curriculum framework*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (1994). *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa/ Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2004). *Kei Tau o te Pae Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars*. Wellington: Learning Media Ltd.
- Somerset, G. (1988). *Sunshine and shadow*. Auckland: New Zealand Playcentre Federation.
- Te One, S. (2003). The context for Te Whāriki: Contemporary issues of influence. In J. Nuttall (Ed.), *Weaving Te Whāriki. Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document in theory and practice* (pp.269-296); Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- The Imperial Readers: Southern Cross Series. (1899). *First Primer*. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd.

Wardle, D. (1970). *English popular education 1780–1970*. London: Cambridge University Press.