

NEW ZEALAND FREE KINDERGARTEN UNION (INCORPORATED)

1967 CONFERENCE - NAPIER-TARADALE

PRESIDENT'S REMARKS

Over the years it has become traditional for the President to open the conference proper with remarks entirely of her own - both choice of subject and of thinking. Coming as I do after many outstanding Presidents, I find it hard to break new ground, as most subjects one would expect to feature in such remarks have been covered.

However, when I visited the Honourable the Minister of Education in August, as the President of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union, one remark, or rather request, gave me a lead as to what might be a subject that would give all of us food for thought. He said, "There is one thing I would like you to do for me, and for the kindergarten movement - and that is - try to change the thinking of those people who say that pre-school institutions are just 'baby-minding' places."

A lady was once visiting a kindergarten and during the course of her visit said to a small boy doing a painting, "How do you make a picture?" And his reply was, "I think, and then I draw a line round it." I have thought a lot about the Minister's request and this is my attempt to 'draw a line round it'.

I feel that the answer lies in a complete evaluation of our movement. If we think that the number of people who view pre-school education as 'baby-minding' is just a few - then we have no need to worry further - but if we think there are enough of them to influence public opinion - then those of us who are willing, and prepared and privileged to help in the field of early childhood education must make sure that the purpose of our effort is known to all.

The President of the Union looks in two directions - the stronger eye is focussed on the scene where the child is the important factor. Round him is an assortment of equipment, a building, staff members, sometimes mothers, committee members or council members. Do any of these contribute to the impression of 'baby-minding'? Let us take a look. Are some of the children outside the gate, unattended - left by mothers on the way to work? Is there enough equipment of educational value and of sufficient interest to present a challenge - or is it the sort that very quickly produces boredom with the resultant problem of behaviour? Are staff members carrying out programmes according to the teaching of their Training Colleges? Are committee members and council members interested enough to visit the kindergartens to see for themselves? Are committee and council members sure themselves? Are committee and council members sure that mothers of kindergarten children know what the educational thinking is, behind the play which their children enjoy? Are they encouraged to feel that it is their kindergarten, and the knowledge gained there can make them richer and happier parents? Are they really included or do some of them actually add to the number who think of the kindergarten as a 'baby-minding' institution?

With the other eye the President looks in the direction of the Education Department. We come first to the Office of Pre-School Education and the increasing staff of advisers. This office was set up, and exists today, because of the voluntary effort of those people, who, over the years, have fostered pre-school education, and have established it as an integral part of our education system. Because we are the reason for its existence, are we completely satisfied with the service it offers, or have we reached the stage where the tail is wagging the dog? To reach the Minister of Education two more offices - that of the Director of Primary School Education, part of

whose province is the pre-school field, and from here to the Director-General who is responsible for the complete overall picture and is the chief adviser for grants from the Education vote. Are we satisfied that our effort, which today amounts to \$250,000 in money annually, and immeasurable in the education benefit to the age group we cater for, is fully known right up the ladder to the Minister? Should we be painting our own picture at every rung?

I have pondered all these questions many times and even now I could not give a 'yes or no' answer to a lot of them. But of one thing I am certain - a well run kindergarten could never be mistaken for a 'baby-minding' institution! It is your job, and mine to make sure that not even a few people have this erroneous impression. Children today have so much more to learn, in a span of years which remains the same, and therein lies our justification for working for pre-school education for all children.

In the words of the late John F. Kennedy, "May the justice of our cause be the strength of our argument."

Laura M. C. Ingram