It's not child's play

Because kindergarten teachers are seen as little more than glorified babysitters, they have trouble getting public and politicians alike to take seriously their claim that they need more staff if they are to do their job properly. Staff writer Pauline Ray looks at the problems they face; photographs of the Ponsonby Kindergarten are by Robin Morrison.

"EMERGENCY. HELP! HELP! We have a teacher away sick. Can a mother stay and help — even for one and a half hours?"

That was the frantic message that greeted me recently when I dropped my young son at kindergarten. Rather guiltily, I explained that I couldn't stay that morning. I had a deadline to meet — I was doing a story on the critical staffing situation in kindergartens.

Kindergarten teachers, members of the last female profession to become militant, have been campaigning vigorously for the past five years to improve staffing ratios in kindergartens. In a standard kindergarten there are two teachers. They are in charge of five morning sessions a week of 40 children, and three afternoon sessions of 40 children.

The Kindergarten Teachers' Association have painstakingly prepared a case for more teachers. From the safety angle alone, they say, it is extremely difficult for two adults to keep watch on 40 agile three- or four-year-olds playing in inside and outside areas.

A wad of local and overseas research supports their other claim that the more time an individual child spends with a teacher the more it gains from pre-school education.

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DR DAVID BARNEY, former assistant professor of education at Auckland University and New Zealand's foremost researcher into pre-school education, says that staffing is the critical factor affecting kindergartens.

"If we are going to accept that we have quality pre-school education we can't have it with two teachers rushing backwards and forwards all morning."

Several years ago Dr Barney studied kindergarten programmes. The results were so dismal he didn't publish them.

"I got four senior people in the kindergarten service to suggest the six teachers who were running the best programmes. I selected three named by the advisors and I spent two days at each place watching how a kindergarten runs.

"The thing I was interested in was how they were able to spend their time with any individual or any small group in one activity. But at no time did I see any of the staff manage to spend 10 consecutive minutes with any group of children.

"For example, one girl got out a guitar, sat on the steps and started a music session. Halfway through the song she was needed on the phone by one of the departmental people."

Barney says he keeps hammering the point that a kindergarten is *not like* any other school or business.

"In a traditional primary school each teacher is in her box and remains there for a set period. In a kindergarten it is an open plan situation. When people come into the school they come into the 'classroom'."

Barney advocates a team of three adults to 15 children, an approach used in programmes such as Head Start in the United States. The three adults include a lead teacher, an assistant teacher and a parent. The role of each is carefully defined.

"I've given up fighting on the teacher-child ratio because that misses a lot of the complexities of the situation. It doesn't take into account the differing skills, the expertise and the personality of the teachers.

"I'm more concerned about looking at this constant interruption, at the short time a teacher can spend with each child. There is a mass of research to show that not only in language work, but in things like motor development and cognitive development, a quality programme means the opportunity for two people to sit down with two different levels of learning and understanding and to interact together."

According to Barney, the typical Kiwi five-year-old gains several things from pre-school: knowledge about (1) what goes on in school, (2) the way that things are kept in certain places and (3) how work operates to some sort of timetable. Children also learn to relate to authority figures other than parents. They learn socialisation and they learn the cognitive and motor skills that enable them to move on to more rapid formal learning at school.

Is the public aware of the importance of pre-school?

"I think it has changed a little, but I'm sure most people think pre-school is 'just play'. They don't realise that children learn from play, that pre-school is a different situation from backyard play.

"If you look at the way many people view pre-school, it's just 'looking after' small children. Mothers have looked after small children for years for nothing and still manage to do the housework, so it's obviously not time-consuming. The care element is given priority."

Barney said he would like to see "the man in gumboots" working in pre-school.

"I don't think he would have any idea how skilled it is. It's also quite different from primary or secondary teaching. I'm sure the low status it has is entirely related to the fact that it's a women's organisation looking after very small children."

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TO IMPROVE STAFFING ratios has been a KTA policy for years. The campaign hotted up two years ago, however, when teachers threatened to lower rolls in kindergartens unless their demands were met. At that stage they were negotiating with the Minister of Education, Merv Wellington. When he heard of their threatened action, he refused to keep talking. Reluctantly the teachers called off the action — and continued negotiations.

In May 1979, the Minister set up a working party to examine the need for improved staffing ratios. Involved were the then assistant director general of education, Peter Boag, and representatives of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union, the Kindergarten Teachers' Association and the Department of Education.

Their recommendations, briefly summarised, called for more part-time or full-time teachers. Teachers hoped they would see results in the 1980 or 1981 Budgets. No such luck. However, they did get two concessions in the 1981 Budget: a national appointments and appeal scheme, which will protect teachers under the Education Act against unfair dismissal or appointments; and a support scheme, which will free senior teachers to work with other teachers.

Neil Leckie, director of early childhood education at the Department of Education, says the department "goes along" with the recommendations of the standing committee.

The committee suggested a progressive implementation of the proposals, which are currently before Wellington. Leckie points out that considerable expense would be involved and

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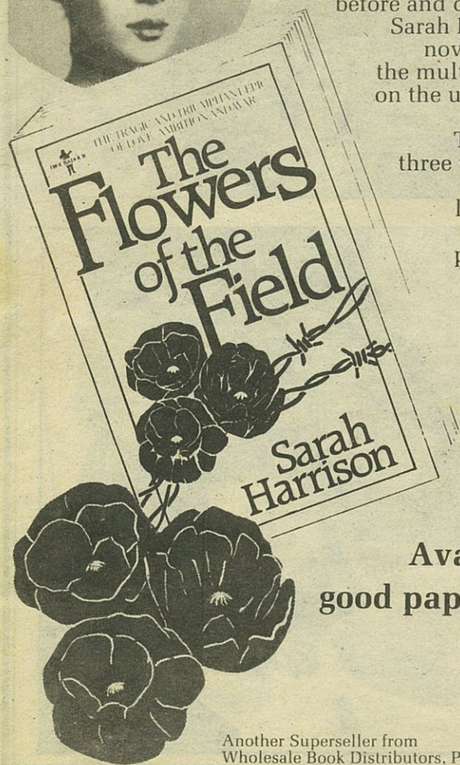

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Ann Hatherly: "We're increasingly dealing with parents' problems."

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cases on the list. They included:

- a child from a broken marriage and suffering from a hearing problem
- a child whose mother died last year; he lives at home with his baby brother and his father, who is not coping well
- a withdrawn child of little speech, referred by the Health Department and an educational psychologist
- a child with a hearing problem; her doctor fears she may be going deaf

Case 11: "This child was a battered baby who was removed from his mother by the Welfare Department. He has emotional problems and little speech, and also has physical problems from the broken bones he suffered as a baby."

Bruce says it is not as though a teacher has the same 80 children all year: "In some kindergartens that number will have turned over in a term."

Teachers say that the Education Department views the service through "rose-tinted glasses". They maintain that the role and image of kindergartens has had to change constantly to keep up with the demands of a more complex society. As pre-school education becomes more available (85 to 90 per cent of four-year-olds now have some form of pre-school education) so do the pressures on teachers increase. Kindergarten teachers, like Plunket nurses, are among the first professional workers a family meets.

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CAROLYN MARTIN is head teacher at Takapuna, a two-teacher kindergarten on Auckland's affluent North Shore: Ann Hatherly is head teacher at the inner-city Ponsonby three-teacher kindergarten; Denise Fogarty is head teacher at Orakei kindergarten, which has three teachers in the mornings and two in the afternoons.

They say that as society becomes more complex, so does their job.

Fogarty: "I think you have to look at how society has changed over 30 years. Look at different things happening in different communities. It's all very well to ask a mother to help, but look at the increase in numbers of working mothers."

Judy Gilbert says the biggest "time taker" is parent contact "and that's not really a complaint. It's very much part of the job".

Hatherly: "We're not working with 80 children. We are working with 80 families. We don't expect parents just to drop their children at the gate and that's it. They want to come in, to be involved. We're increasingly dealing with parents' problems."

Hatherly says that with three teachers she is able to do more small group work.

"I work with English-as-second-language children. If there were only two of us, the interruptions would be too great even for 10-minute sessions.

"With three you are also freer to observe the children, which is really important. We are the first professional people outside the family to have the children for any length of time. All research shows that the earlier you detect problems the better. To do that often you have to stand back and observe if the children are being worked with other teachers.

"There is more time for special activities such as cooking. You can't do that, or even visit the bulldozer up the road, if the phone is going all the time."

Fogarty: "In comparison with primary or secondary school teachers we are involved in much more administration, with parents, and general community contact. All of these things are very important, but they are a real drain on time, just as keeping charts and the environment interesting are."

Gilbert says that when she visits a kindergarten she sees two worn-out, frazzled teachers.

"Both the teachers have to know all the 40 children — 80 in a day. A conglomerate size is the big obstacle. No person can relate on a really satisfactory level to that many people in a day."

She says that the teachers are not pre-empting parent involvement. They want that as well.

"We are just saying that three teachers are the minimum we need."●

that "it is the old problem of matching resources."

"But the question of implementing them is a political decision and not one the Department makes itself."

He believes it is unlikely that any announcement will be made until the middle of next year.

Wellington spoke at the KTA's annual conference held in the August holidays at Orongomai marae in Upper Hutt. Teachers questioned him at length, but he said he was unable to make a firm commitment at present to increase staffing levels.

Rosslyn Noonan, who recently resigned as secretary of the KTA, believes that the measures introduced in the Budgets show that the Government is at least concerned about the electoral potential of kindergarten teachers. (Teachers are organising themselves to ask pertinent questions at election meetings. They plan to publish anything and everything candidates say about pre-school education policies.)

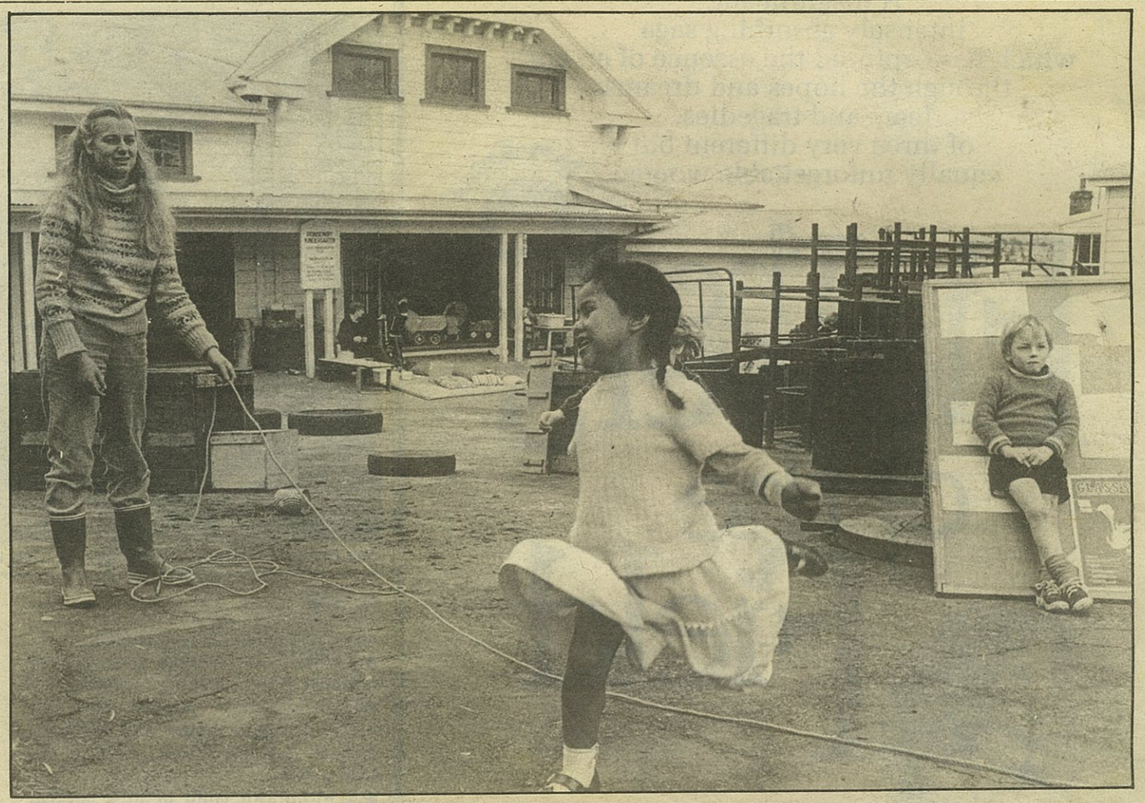
Says Noonan: "We haven't got thousands of members [the KTA has 1200] but lots of parents are concerned about the issue."

In early July, the Auckland branch of the KTA and the Auckland Kindergarten Association organised a protest rally in Aotea Square. However, newspaper photographs of mothers pushing their youngsters in pushchairs led to a flurry of letters to the editor about parents using their children to push radical ends. Some politicians went as far as to suggest that amounted to child abuse.

It didn't seem to occur to such critics that if a mother wishes to attend any daytime public gathering she usually has to take her young children.

To the teachers, public reaction to the rally symbolised the widely misunderstood role of the kindergarten service. By the time they went to their annual conference at Orongomai marae, many teachers clearly felt at the end of their tether.

Staffing levels were the main concern at the conference and the KTA passed two strong remits. One says, "If there is no firm commitment from the Government on the implementation of the staffing scheme by February 1982 this council authorises the National Executive to call stop-work meetings in all branches to consider direct action."



The essence of pre-school education in New Zealand is outlined in the 1971 Hill Report, says Judy Gilbert, supervisor for the Auckland Kindergarten Association. The aim is that teachers work in close contact with each child. "That is our guiding theme, that we work to meet individual children's needs. That is a total farce at the moment."

Noonan says the solution that most politicians suggest is that teachers make the children sit longer on the mat. In the face of such attitudes, she says, negotiations at times prove to be an uphill battle.

"They don't deliberately not agree. They just have no awareness of the experience of kindergarten teachers."

She believes politicians would take more notice if teachers were screaming for more pay.

"They can't understand it when our main issue in a way is altruistic."

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ALTHOUGH THE STANDARD kindergarten has only two teachers, kindergartens with "special needs" are allocated another teacher. Some 60 kindergartens throughout the country have "special needs" — meaning usually that a number of the children have English as their second language.

Yet a 1977 study by John Panckhurst, now principal of Wellington Teachers' College, showed that there are on average nine children with special needs in every kindergarten.

Lynne Bruce, past president of the KTA, recently compiled a dossier of children with special needs in an unnamed kindergarten. There were 18

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