

Friday 4 July 1980

Address to the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union Annual Conference
Wanganui. By Lynne Bruce, President, New Zealand Free Kindergarten
Teachers Association.

Your worship, Mr Marshall M.P., Mr President and other distinguished
guests, friends and colleagues -

It gives me very great pleasure to be here tonight to give the
opening address to your conference, I would like to thank your
executive for inviting me to do so.

The invitation is I believe not so much a personal one, but an
invitation to the office which I am very proud to hold - the
office of KTA President.

New Zealand I fear faces a future of increasing confrontation as the
gap widens between employers and employees - between the haves and
the have-nots.

The kindergarten movement has two options. We can, if we
choose, unquestioningly adopt the traditional attitudes between
employer and employee. I question however how relevant are
private sector employer/employee relationships to a community
service like ours. The second option is to set an example by
moving away from automatic confrontation. We can work - if
we choose -^{to} develop a service committed to cooperative organisation
and cooperative management.

If we cannot work effectively together, if we cannot combine our
energies, if we operate as unrelated factions with very different
priorities, then whatever gains have been made within the last
5 - 7 years to improve the public status and recognition of the
value of our service, those gains will be lost.

I see our kindergarten movement as having an exciting and unique
opportunity to pioneer the development of a cooperative enterprise
with parents, teachers and association members all contributing on
an equal basis and each acknowledging the value of the others
equal contribution.

I believe there is a really urgent need for us to get together, to
talk, to work and to prepare together for change.

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Tonight I hope my address can be a contribution toward a developing and productive dialogue between us. In the short time available I will concentrate on only three areas:

1. the relationships between teachers and associations
2. the relationship between KTA and associations and the Union.
3. the need for changes in the services provided to children and their families by the kindergarten movement.

1. Relationships between teachers and Associations

In my travels around the country, visiting kindergartens and KTA branches a very clear pattern has emerged:

Where relations between teachers and their employing Associations are really good- where there is mutual trust and respect - the standard of programme and teaching in the kindergartens is much higher than it is in areas where relations between Associations and teachers are poor, distrustful, defensive.

In those areas where relations are good problems within the kindergartens are few and when they do occur positive, practical and supportive measures are taken to overcome them.

The most important result of good relationships is a first class service to the children and families we work with - a service which is exciting, extending, caring and supportive. The programmes in those areas give every child the opportunity for diverse learning experiences, for social interaction and fulfillment, for sound physical and emotional development.

Unfortunately however there are still a number of areas where relations between teachers and Associations are far from satisfactory.

Last year in her opening address to the KTA Annual Meeting my predecessor Robin Houlker said she had become disturbed during her visits to branches, kindergartens and Kindergarten Associations to note the quite negative attitudes that some Associations have towards the teachers they employ. A year later I am still experiencing these attitudes.

It has been suggested to me for example that kindergarten teachers have a pretty easy life and really don't do anything much apart from keep an eye on the kids ! To a teacher physically and emotionally drained at the end of a day spent dealing with some 80 children, any number of adults and a noise level often approaching danger levels such an attitude is upsetting to say the least.

It has been suprising to discover just how many Association officers have only the most superficial understanding of the free play philosphy , of basic child development and of how a young child learns.

While teachers have a responsibility to inform and involve parents in their kindergarten programmes so that they gain a wider understanding of their child's development the Associations themselves must take the initiative to ensure that their officers are well informed.

Last year KTA at our annual meeting passed a remit urging the Department of Education to ensure that NZFKU members were involved in national in-service courses and thus assisted to keep up with developments and trends in early childhood education.

Perhaps together we can ensure that association officers participate in local and regional courses and perhaps we should be doing more as a movement to promote understanding of early childhood services.

Let me assure you that KTA is just as concerned as you that teachers maintain the highest professional standards, indeed KTA executive members and particularly successive presidents have spent much of their time battling to improve programme standards and to provide professional support for our members.

Kindergarten teachers desperately need the imaginative in-put of creative and sensitive fellow teachers who can share ideas and be supportive rather than critical and judgemental.

These are the qualities particularly necessary in senior head teachers and supervising head teachers.

A number of Associations have suggested to me that there is little positive action they can take until the government implements the

the professional support scheme we negotiated last year. This scheme provides for release time for senior head teachers. Yet there are Associations which have already managed to provide some time for their senior head teachers to work creatively with the other teachers. And in some areas senior head teachers have developed around themselves a support group of experienced teachers. The Associations concerned acknowledge that these teachers have a positive role to play in assisting with problems and in promoting professional development of local teachers.

If Associations are dedicated to ensuring the highest professional standards in their kindergartens then there are three further points which I think you must consider carefully.

First I have already suggested that the opportunity for teachers to share experiences and ideas with other teachers is of primary importance. Renowned British educationalist Tizard has shown through his extensive research that children learn most effectively where teachers have the greatest autonomy, where they are able to make their own decisions about methods and content of teaching and presentation. In some areas kindergarten teachers feel completely constricted by the various local association by-laws which appear to impede on areas of professional decision-making. In my view many of the by-laws covering excursions and visitors to kindergartens fall into this category.

Kindergarten teachers are professionals who welcome support, suggestions and feed-back from parents and Associations about their programmes and services. Most teachers are-and all should be-prepared to discuss openly and honestly their methods and approaches. But they can only do this in an atmosphere of trust and not one of control. On a recent trip I met two teachers who told me that a visit from the local Association president had been the highlight of their year. The president had told a meeting of local parents and committee members that the teachers were professionals and that communities were the staffs support system and not their bosses.

The second point relates to how an association reacts when a teacher is performing inadequately.

My personal concern is the number of cases which arise where the teacher causing concern has had no real prior indication that her/his work is not up to scratch. Often complaints come through to me as KTA president before they have been thoroughly discussed with the teacher concerned.

Until we complete the disciplinary regulations and infra-structure that we are currently negotiating with your representatives and the Department of Education, it is important for Associations and KTA branches to get together and work out sensitive and satisfactory procedures for encouraging adequate professional standards amongst local teachers. Indeed much of what we have been discussing at the national level could be implemented by willing Associations even prior to government acceptance of our proposals. I guess you may be discussing some of those proposals later in your conference.

Above all - and whatever the local procedures - I want to stress how important it is to be completely honest about problems and difficulties as they arise. Teachers need to be told about problems in their work in an honest manner and they need to be assured of a supportive atmosphere in which to work to overcome those problems.

I have become very aware of how few skills most of us have when it comes to dealing with conflict and problems. Together with Marie Bell of the Dept. of Education I have been attempting with KTA support and sponsorship to provide kindergarten teachers with the skills needed to face up to conflict in a positive manner and to recognise the need for continuing professional growth. KTA can only do so much - you too have responsibilities in this area.

The third point is a brief one - please can we all stop referring to teachers as girls. Kindergarten teachers are mature women - indeed the average age is now 30. How I cringe when I hear colleagues even older than I am referred to as girls. To call a woman a girl is to imply that she is a minor, immature, dependent, subservient and without responsibility.

Please remember that we are a teaching force of men and women.

I have dealt at some length on the question of relations between teachers and associations in general although in doing so I have
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still touched on only a few areas which affect us all.

2. Relationships between KTA and Associations.

I will now move on somewhat more briefly to touch on a few points affecting KTA/Association relationships.

First let me tell you that at the national level communication between KTA and the NZFKU has developed significantly over the past year. Both national executives have had several chances to meet together, get to know each other and discuss freely and frankly matters of mutual concern. This has certainly led to greater understanding between us and hopefully we will be able to move from simply discussions to joint action on matters of mutual agreement.

At the local level KTA has a policy that KTA branches should meet on a regular and reasonably formal basis with associations at least twice a term. These meetings should involve 3 or 4 representatives of each group and each group should contribute items for discussion to a formal agenda. Notes of the meeting if not formal minutes should be kept.

These meetings should discuss matters of local concern as they arise and should in fact include discussion of any proposed changes before they occur, for example, any changes to local association by-laws.

In some areas these procedures are working well and are contributing to the development of mutual trust and respect.

It is important too for association's to learn to accept the role KTA has to play in protecting and promoting the interests of our members and the services they provide.

You can imagine how angry I felt recently when told that a KTA member had been threatened that if she sought KTA help with a problem she was facing then the Association would have nothing more to do with her.

The Associations must accept that KTA's objective when difficulties

occur is to encourage their resolution in the manner most designed to protect the children, the families and the teachers. We simply insist that problems must be dealt with in a manner which is fair and honest to everyone involved.

I have realised both in my position as a kindergarten head teacher and as KTA president that I can only do the best for my families, children and for KTA members when I can make use of the best possible advice and assistance I can find.

In many but not all instances the best advice and assistance to Associations will come from the teachers in their employ who have first hand practical experience. It saddens me to see Associations reject the involvement of KTA representatives on appointments, staffing and building committees when their presence may result in improved decision making in these areas. I wonder what it is you fear - KTA reps are there to make a positive contribution.

Sometimes, when Associations have declined to even meet with me, I have had to check in the mirror to make sure I hadn't suddenly sprouted horns and two heads.

I believe we will all benefit from developing trusting working relationships. This doesn't mean we will always agree but even differences can produce creative solutions and conflict need not be automatically destructive.

However trusting relationships only develop from mutual respect and you must accept KTA as an organisation with a permanent, positive and integral role to play in the kindergarten movement.

3. Future developments in the kindergarten movement.

This brings me to the final part of my address to you this evening.

Where should we be heading together ?

What should our mutual objectives be ?

Together I believe we must critically examine the future of our kindergarten service.

It was interesting to read your Remit No 21 from Auckland. This remit acknowledges the need for development and change. But I have strong reservations about beginning discussions with the Department of Education before we have worked out where we want to go together.

It is important that we actually listen to the consumers of our service and to those in our communities who don't use our services at the moment.

It is important to ask why so many children presently cannot use our services - and indeed in many instances have access to no early childhood education service at all.

In the last 5 - 10 years we have seen the development of a number of alternative early childhood services. These are making a very positive contribution to early childhood education. But they do not get the kindergarten movement off the hook.

As a movement we began to meet the needs of children who spent their days on the streets without any adult care and supervision. Today the majority of children in our kindergartens come from the more privileged families in our society.

Are there still children out on our streets ?

Do we provide a service for all the ethnic groups within our society ?

Do we meet the needs of children from all economic stratas ?

Let's find out from the communities we serve to what extent we are meeting their needs.

Then we can go to the Minister and his Department armed with a programme of development which reflects what is wanted rather than what is supposed to be good for people.

At our last annual meeting KTA members listed diversification of the service as their second priority after staffing improvements.

Teachers are close to the families and communities they work with. They are dedicated professionals who want the flexibility to respond to local needs. They also want to be sure that the kindergarten service is able to provide life-long and challenging career opportunities. They do not want to see the kindergarten movement begin to contract and wither because it is becoming irrelevant to the needs of increasing numbers of families.

In developing and diversing the kindergarten movement must attract more government resources. We should not be apologetic for putting pressure on government - it is after all not for our own sake but for that of the vital service we provide.

What is more we must be sure that government recognises that money spent on early childhood services results in substantial savings later on special education and other support services.

Unless we convince government of our worth-and of our political clout - we will not be safe. Just consider for a moment the fact that when the government recently made special grants of some \$3½ million to the state education system and more than double that to the integrating private schools --- -- the kindergarten movement received not a single cent. I wonder just how aware you are of the tremendous financial pressures on many of the young families we work with. The cost of everything we need in kindergartens is going up, so-called 'voluntary' kindergarten fees are getting bigger, we are all being forced to pressure parents into more and more fund raising. Some associations seem to judge teachers by how successful they are at extracting donations from parents.

It is time the kindergarten movement stopped being coy about government support. Our first responsibility is to ensure we provide a quality service which gives children the best possible start to their formal educational experiences. It is no responsibility of ours to help the government balance its budget. We will be contributing far more to the longterm development of a healthy society if we can persuade the government of the long term savings to be made by investment in early childhood services now.

Our service by providing quality early childhood education not only saves subsequent expenditure on special education and related remedial fields.

By providing a supportive network for parents particularly mothers we are also saving increased expenditure on tranquillisers and other drugs and helping prevent depression and breakdowns which incur costs now and later.

Studies here and overseas have shown conclusively that the only really effective early childhood services are those that cater for the needs of children and their families. Kindergarten teachers cannot work with the child in isolation from its family. Increasingly kindergarten teachers are the first source of professional advice for mothers, the first source of a sympathetic ear, the first source of support and understanding.

It is not that kindergarten teachers see themselves as social workers - indeed it is precisely because we are not social workers that parents can come to us without feeling that any stigma of failure will attach to them.

If we aren't prepared to make the strongest possible case to government for improvements in our service no one will do it for us. Other groups have no qualms about fighting as hard as possible for their own areas. You only have to consider for example how strongly the Education Boards Association has supported NZEI's campaign to ensure that primary schools get more resources.

Or I wonder if you've noted the very real support most Secondary School Boards have given to the PPTA staffing action which closes their schools from time to time. It is precisely that Board support which has prevented the Government taking action against the secondary teachers.

Together we can be as effective in gaining the much needed and long overdue staffing improvements that will result from the very worthwhile new staffing scheme which we have just finished negotiating with the Department of Education and which now awaits the Minister's consideration.

I urge you to make sure that the Minister hears from this conference loud and clearly that you regard implementation of the agreed scheme as a matter of urgency.

KTA members believe that early childhood education is the most exciting and relevant area of the education system at the present time. We believe that the kindergarten movement can go from strength to strength if it has as its primary objective responding to the needs of individual children, their families and their local communities.

We recognise that this objective requires the ability to constantly adapt and change, to regularly question and evaluate what we are doing.

Kindergarten teachers are prepared to do this - are you ?

Robin Houlker concluded her address to kindergarten teachers last August by pointing out that in promoting changes within the kindergarten service KTA has one sole motivation:
the well being of the children who are entrusted to our care.

Like Robin , I ask that those who oppose our suggestions should carefully consider why they do so. Do they oppose change out of concern for children or is it because they wish to preserve systems and structures ^{with} which they feel comfortable and which entrench their own power.

Friends I know that we all have as our primary concern the needs of children and I know that together we can make an even greater contribution to their wellbeing than we have in the past.

