

Enid Thelma WILSON (1896–1994)
Principal Wellington Free Kindergarten Association 1928–1948

Enid Thelma Wilson was born in 1896, one of six children (three daughters, and three sons) of Frank and Annie Wilson. Her father was Premier of Western Australia between 1910–1917. Enid's closest sister in age was Norma Linley, a well-known ballet teacher and national advocate for the ballet profession. Enid too entered the professions to graduate as a kindergartener in 1916 at the age of twenty. She worked both in Sydney and Perth, where she later held the position of Principal for the Kindergarten Association of Western Australia. This was an exciting time in which people such as Australian Lillian de Lissa actively promoted reform of the nineteenth century interpretations of Froebel in Australia.¹ As Prochner states 'student teaching combined Froebelian kindergarten work with the new ideas of Montessori.'² Such calls for reform were embraced and promoted by Wilson.

In July 1928, Wilson arrived in New Zealand to take up a position as Training Principal for the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association. She was, wrote a reporter that month, 'a very charming lady'. She was also outspoken and not afraid to speak publicly. In an early interview that was published July 19, 1928, Wilson compared teacher training and kindergarten work in Wellington with that she was familiar with in Perth. Whereas in Wellington students trained in the cramped kindergarten building itself, in Perth, students studied in a training college centre under 'much more pleasant surroundings'. In Wellington it was a two-year course of study for which there was no fee, whereas in Perth it was three-year course for which the girls had to pay. Wilson argued that whilst three years may seemed to be a long time, 'the girls went out at the end of that time feeling that they had only just begun to have their eyes opened.'³ Wilson soon set out to modernise both the Association's teacher training and the children's programme along progressive lines grounded in a knowledge base that included

¹ Larry Prochner, *A history of early childhood education in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, (UBCPress Vancouver, 2009)

² *Ibid*, 226

³ 'Wellington Principal Arrival from Australia', *Evening Post*, 19 July, 1928, 13

scientific child study.⁴ Prochner argues Wilson 'extended her greatest efforts on training a new cadre of teachers ... with a new reflective attitude toward child education, with the focus on individual children.'⁵ The training programme was revised to meet this new approach.

Wilson's annual reports, speeches and press interviews show her in-depth knowledge of progressive ideals and ongoing commitment towards children and their families. Holding professional development in high regard, Wilson kept up to date with changes and new ideas in the field. She took leave in 1928 to visit Nursery School work in Australia and in 1938 to visit London's Institute of Education where she successfully completed a course on child development under the tuition of British psychologist and educationalist, Dr. Susan Isaacs. A course of study that was also undertaken by WFKA staff, Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton and Enid (Ted) Scott. Her travels had the support of the WFKA Council who in 1932 it was stated 'feels very strongly how much Miss Wilson will absorb and how much benefit she will derive from her experience in the States, her attendance at the Summer School at Columbia University and also her visit to England ... as she has gone entirely at her own expenses', and later in 1938 'we are indeed fortunate in having such a progressive Principal who is ever on the watch for new ideas, which enrich the work.'⁶

The 1930s was an eventful decade for Wilson and the Association. An economic decline saw Government take action in December 1931 to withdraw all grants and subsidies for free kindergarten work leaving associations in a financially dire position. Interviewed by a local reporter Wilson said:

it seemed hardly believable that any country could ruthlessly sweep away a movement which has worldwide recognition and which is acclaimed by the teaching and medical profession as one of the most worthwhile works a country can undertake. We trust all recognise the need for drastic economy ... but it must be recognised that an economy that is detrimental to the future progress of a country should be the last to be considered.⁷

⁴ Larry Prochner, *A history of early childhood education in Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Vancouver: UBC Press; 2009), 229.

⁵ Ibid, 229

⁶ President's Report 1932-33, Wellington Free Kindergarten Association, Alexander Turnbull Library, MSX-2527

⁷ 'The Young Mind', *Evening Post*, 8 February, 1932, 10

Little did she or the association know that matters were going to become worse before the grants and subsidies were eventually reinstated in 1934.

Enid Wilson established and exercised her authoritative voice in her advocacy for children and their families. Her stance is articulated in her Principal's Report for 1936. She ends with an urgent plea:

to the Government, to make haste in recognising the national importance of this work; to the general public, to display more curiosity about works of fundamental importance to the community, and to come and see the Kindergarten in operation; and to parents, to investigate more closely the opportunities for training that the community offers girls, to consider the natural instincts of their daughters and so help them choose a training in accord with their real interests so that they may know happiness and satisfaction in its truest sense.⁸

1937 was an eventful year for the association and for Wilson. In July they helped host the large New Education Foundation conference that saw all the schools and kindergarten close for the week to allow staff to attend. WFKA played host to Susan Isaacs, including taking over the task of responding to the many written inquiries from parents in response to Isaacs' radio talks and presentations whilst in New Zealand.⁹

Another task came to fruition in August when WFKA held a weeklong centenary party in honour of the first kindergarten, instituted in Germany by Friedrich Froebel in 1837. Enid Wilson had overseen the organization of the week's events. Moreover, at the graduates' dinner Enid Wilson, in her reply to the toast 'The Kindergarten', referred to the great work of the early pioneers – Froebel and Montessori; also of the Wellington pioneers Misses Richmond and Riley.¹⁰ May argues the occasion was a time to both look back but 'that there were also heightened expectations for the future.'¹¹

⁸ 'Principal's Report', WFKA Annual Meeting Report for 1936, Alexander Turnbull Library MS-y 1912, p.10

⁹ For further information on NEF see Helen May, *The discovery of early childhood* [2nd Ed] (NZCER Press, Wellington)

¹⁰ 'Free Kindergarten graduates dinner, *Evening Post*, 17 August, 1937, 15

¹¹ *Discovery of early childhood education*, 355

Next came the major New Zealand Centennial Exhibitions held in Wellington and James Fletcher's generous offering of a full-sized model kindergarten building. The new building provided opportunity for the kindergarten movement to deliberately and consciously represent themselves and the kindergarten cause to the world. The objectives for the model kindergarten were twofold: firstly to educate, that visitors to the exhibition might learn something of the work done by the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union for the education of children under school age; and secondly, as the home association, WFKA held significant organisational and hosting roles.

As part of the educative objective, Enid Wilson spoke on "*The Development of Free Kindergarten Work in New Zealand*"ⁱⁱ and worked with two others Association members to oversee the development and publication of a booklet entitled "*Let us live with our children*"ⁱⁱⁱ They organized local educators interested in kindergarten to write papers of interest to parents. These, and an essay from England's Susan Isaacs, were published and sold to help allay costs. Wilson contributed an essay entitled 'The play life of the child' in which she espouses progressive ideals around the importance of play as a means of learning, the need for teachers to observe and be guided by the child's actions and that learning was a difficult process and a gradual one.

We should never forget that the soul of the child is more sensitive than anything man can create. When we consciously set out to understand something of what is involved in the business of growing up, the child has still to face all the difficulties of his own nature and to conquer the anxieties that arise from his lack of experience.¹²

The exhibition was widely viewed by the kindergarten associations as a great success; in particular for Wellington association. Enid Wilson in her report for 1940 wrote: 'we are aware of much progressive effort. Our number of kindergartens in operation remained the same, but we have achieved an up-to-date, well-equipped building which fulfilled its just function as a Kindergarten Union Centennial Exhibit even more satisfactorily than we had dreamed off'.^{iv}

¹² Enid Wilson, 'The play life of the child' in *Let us live with our children*, (Wellington Free Kindergarten Association, 1939), 29

In 1948, following retirement from the Association – but not her interest in the education of young children – Enid and her friend Ted Scott travelled to Australia visiting nursery schools where, as they reported back to the Association, they found excellent equipment and a more spacious environment (the latter probably necessary because of the heat). They undertook some broadcasting work on kindergarten work and were looking forward to visiting Sydney's Lady Gowrie Centre and attending the 1948 N.E.F. Conference in Hobart. In 1950, and back in New Zealand, Wilson and Scott bought some land in Upper Hutt and created a market garden "Wilscott Gardens".¹³ Here they grew and supplied fruit and vegetables to local residents and also grew flowers for many important functions both in the valley and in Wellington city.

Wilson and Scott maintained contact with many past staff and students and were regular attendees at the five yearly Wellington Kindergarten Graduate Association reunions. On one occasion in 1965, they entertained the delegates at that year's reunion to morning tea in the Cricket Club's new pavilion in the park. The event was captured in the local paper entitled 'Children their life work'. Mrs Pink, Upper Hutt's well known caterer was warmly congratulated on her catering effort which was all the more appreciated as in her childhood she had attended the Taranaki Street Kindergarten and Nursery School of which Miss Scott was the highly regarded Director. Later the party made a visit to Wilscott Gardens.¹⁴

By the late 1960s Wilscott gardens was becoming too big for Wilson and Scott to manage and they moved into smaller home in the valley. Enid Wilson died in 1994, aged 98, Ted Scott having preceded her some years before.

Author: Kerry Bethell

See also: Enid Thelma Wilson: kindergarten, principal, gardener, and friend to many.

¹³ Upper Hutt Paper Vol XXX no 38. Clipping in album, Alexander Turnbull Library PAI – 0 680

¹⁴ Upper Hutt Paper Vol XXX no 38. Clipping in album, ATL PAI – 0 680

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