

## **A tribute to a long time kindergartener: Miss Phyllis Varcoe 1919-2017**

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Miss Phyllis Margaret Varcoe, a life member of the Dunedin Kindergarten Association and a past senior lecturer at the Dunedin College of Education, died on 5 August 2017. She was 98 years of age. Miss Varcoe trained as a primary school teacher at the Dunedin Training College in 1939-40 but soon realised she really wanted to teach in kindergarten and in 1944 was appointed to a kindergarten teaching position. In 1946 she attended the postwar national teacher in-service course for kindergarten teachers held in Dunedin, where kindergarteners old and young planned for the possibilities of a state supported kindergarten service, available to all children. By the 1950s she was working with Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton at the Dunedin Kindergarten College, which with other colleges was struggling to train sufficient teachers to meet the demand by parents and communities for kindergartens.

In 1954 Miss Varcoe became the first president of the newly established New Zealand Free Kindergarten Teachers Association. It was not until 1958, with the legal requirements complete that the NZFKTA was able to negotiate its first employment conditions. In keeping with the ethos of lady-like kindergarteners, Varcoe, reminded her members not to permit ‘...the desire for more salary to overshadow the paramount aim – to advance the cause of education amongst preschool children.’

In 1966-1967 Miss Varcoe was awarded a Jamieson Scholarship to further her studies at Birmingham University in England. She undertook a research project on the idea of a three-year qualification for kindergarten students. In 1968 Miss Varcoe was appointed as the Principal of the Dunedin Kindergarten College.



'First years' with Principal. P. Varcoe 1967, Dunedin Kindergarten College, DKA MS-1988/004, S13-567a HC

In 1974 Miss Varcoe transferred with her students to the Dunedin Teachers' College when kindergarten training nationally was shifted into teachers' colleges. While there were benefits for students there were many challenges in this move and kindergarten staff such as Miss Varcoe struggled to uphold an early childhood pedagogy amidst colleges constructed around the school subjects. Accompanying Miss Varcoe on her move was the 1925 lithograph '*Madonna and the Factories*' by the socialist artist, Gerald Spenser Pryce, which had been purchased by the Dunedin Free Kindergarten Executive committee as a gift to their students, after its display at the 1925-26 New Zealand South Seas International Exhibition in Dunedin. For some years the lithograph has been hung outside the Dean's Office at the University of Otago College of Education.



'Madonna and the Factories' 1925 lithograph, by Gerald Spenser Pryce, UOCE.

Miss Varcoe retired from the College in 1986, at a time when a government working party for three qualification for kindergarten teachers was finally underway. However, the eventual qualification was not just for kindergarten but a general early childhood education qualification phased in across the country from 1988-1990.

I first met Miss Varcoe, as I always called her, in 1994 when she agreed to be interviewed for my book written with Sue Middleton, *Teachers Talk Teaching* (1997). She gave an indepth commentary on kindergarten in particular across the mid century years. It is intended to edit this interview for publication on the New Zealand Kindergarten Heritage website <http://kindergartenhistory.org.nz>.

Miss Varcoe also allowed me to peruse her nine scrapbooks she had compiled during her kindergarten years. These are a treasure trove of events and happenings about mainly kindergarten matters. The scrapbooks were again loaned to me during the writing of the my book *People Places and Play in the 'Child Gardens' of Dunedin* (2014) commissioned and published by the Dunedin Kindergarten Association for its 125 year celebration. The scrapbooks were then donated to the Hocken Collections. Miss Varcoe was a keen participant in the jubilee celebrations, and a long time keen attendee at all AGM's of the Association. The photograph above, was taken at the opening of the new Helen Deem Centre in 2014 by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. John Key. With the Prime Minister's assistance Miss Varcoe was a cake cutter.

Miss Varcoe was of a generation of kindergarten teachers who sought to forge a new professional era of kindergarten teaching which valued advanced qualifications and an international outlook. There were many hurdles, but by the time of her retirement Miss Varcoe acknowledged the establishment of a very different era for early childhood education where much had been achieved. The strategies and tactics of this generation of kindergarten leaders might have been labelled as 'lady like' and were later resisted by younger generations who were prepared to take direct action, but they were nevertheless most effective at the time.