

The early adventures of Anne and the politics of childcare

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A book inspired by the achievements of Professor Anne B Smith, a pioneer of evidence-based policy and practice in New Zealand

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Introduction

Dr Anne Smith, with her husband, John, and two preschool children, arrived in NZ in late 1974, appointed to the University of Otago as a lecturer in education in the field of human development. In Canada, where both Anne and John had been studying for their doctorates, as well as teaching, they had used various childcare arrangements. Anne was for a time also on the governance board of a centre. ‘I started to understand the more detailed texture of what a good childcare centre was like’. There were federal government subsidies for childcare in Canada. This was not the case in NZ. ‘It was a pretty bad scene in Dunedin.’ There was a dearth of provision, no funding support and little understanding of what comprised quality childcare.

The university crèche had this philosophy that the shorter the time you left the child the better. They were good people who were trying to do a good job, but it was like a railway station. There were kids and parents coming and going. There was no settled programme. I did not feel comfortable leaving a child in something like that all day. I did have something to do with the crèche later, and tried to tell them that it’s not true that the shorter the time you left the child the better. It’s very unsettling for them.¹

Anne and John cobbled together a range of childcare including kindergarten and a home carer. However, when John got a position at the Dunedin Teacher’s College, it was made clear to Anne that, not only should she stay at home with her children, but she should also put

¹ Interview with Anne Smith, 1994

her husband's career first. 'It was quite clear when I came back to NZ that, this was not what people did here.' Likewise, within the Department of Education at the university there was strong support for John Bowlby theories on the ills of maternal deprivation (Bowlby, 1951) with several colleagues active in organisations opposing childcare. Thus began Anne's adventurous journey over more than four decades, using the personal and institutional resources of academia, through research, writing, presentation, conferencing, film making and travel, to present the research and policy arguments for quality child care, and more broadly for quality early childhood. Framed around the year 1975, and its aftermath, this chapter details some of the events, people and politics encountered by Anne in her first 'ventures' as an academic into the New Zealand early childhood scene. This is recalled as a pivotal year for the politics of childcare with the crafting of some shared understandings of the equity issues for women and children (May, 2003, 2009).

International Women's Year: the conference circuit

Soon after arriving in NZ Anne was in the midst of a flurry of conferences, reports, and submissions. Nineteen seventy-five was International Women's Year (IWY). A Select Committee was established by Parliament to consider 'the extent of discrimination of women in New Zealand.' Its report gave considerable focus to childcare, 'accept[ing] the principle that for women to be able to achieve genuine choice in their lives some of the responsibility for the care of the young must be borne by the wider community.' (Select Committee on Women's Rights, 1975: 86) Rosslyn Noonan was appointed IWY national organiser and became a key player in early childhood politics over subsequent years. She recalled:

Nineteen-seventy-five is the crucial year because it brought together early childhood education and the women's movement which had overlapping issues... Early childhood education people were beginning to analyse their inability to deliver what they saw as incredibly important - equality for all children... A number of us who were in that first wave of feminists also had young children. We knew about suburban neurosis... The issues I was involved with [during 1975] were... focusing on gaining a healthier community which supported families with young children. I don't think we succeeded.²

² Interview with Rosslyn Noonan, 1999.

In the aftermath of the IWY United Women's Convention the headline in the *Sunday Times* (19 October 1975) read 'Childcare Unites Women'. The article named many organisations who were agreed that a united front was called for:

The National Council of Women has been trying for over a year to talk with Government about childcare ... We get nice answers from them about what they've done and what they're doing, but their overall commitment seems lacking.

Several government sponsored conferences followed in the aftermath. Anne was in attendance.

One of the first things I did was give a paper at the first Early Childhood Convention in Christchurch in 1975. It was called 'The Case for Quality Day Care – Liberation of Children and Parents...There wasn't a single other thing about childcare at the conference. It was very kindergarten dominated.... !³

Anne assured her audience that, 'The development of quality day care programmes is not a challenge to the family...Daycare is ... an additional means of support [and] may actually improve or enhance the quality of family life.' (Smith, 1978: 248). To support her argument Anne cited research, indicating that childcare could be beneficial for children (Caldwell 1967; Fein & Clarke-Stewart, 1973). She also cited Michael Rutter in his book *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* (1972: 64):

Day care need not necessarily interfere with the normal mother-child attachment and the available evidence gives no reason to suppose that the use of day nurseries has any long-term psychological or physical ill effects.

Anne's favoured model was community childcare with parent involvement and professional support with qualified teachers, 'which should be provided regardless of the family's ability to pay for it' and for which one, 'must therefore expect a greatly increased level of government support.' (Smith 1978: 251-2).

There were over 1000 attendees at this first early childhood convention. The Director General of Education, William Renwick, addressed delegates around the theme of the 'moving frontier' in early childhood education and summed up the childcare issue:

Most of us who have thought about early childhood education find the circumstances of these parents so foreign to our experiences, and the situation of their children so

³ Interview with Anne Smith, 1994

fraught with the possibilities of damage, that we are ill-equipped to find satisfactory educational answers to the problems they pose.

He posed a challenge to the mainly kindergarten and playcentre audience:

We have to break the mould of our own convictions and attitudes before we can begin to think constructively about finding solutions to situations as they are, not as we would like them to be (Renwick, 1978: 235).

Government response to the ‘moving frontier’ was slow, nevertheless, Renwick’s address signified that new policy directions were needed. Renwick also noted the emergence of a ‘national constituency’ for early childhood. The members of this constituency, of which Anne was to become a key player, found the translation of changing attitudes into policies frustratingly slow.

Anne also attended the 1975 Education and the Equality of the Sexes Conference, meeting with other key players: Geraldine McDonald, Beverley Morris, Marie Bell, Val Burn, Wendy Lee, Anne Meade and Rosslyn Noonan. Not surprisingly, the headlines in the conference proceedings stated, ‘Early Childhood Education: An Angry Group’. Their report addressed the status of early childhood in the education sector. Noonan wrote:

An analysis of the staffing structure of early childhood educational services revealed a disproportionate number of women at the bottom and an equally disproportionate number of men at the top. The workers are almost exclusively female, the consumers are children and their families, and [the] decision-makers, [are] men (Department of Education, 1976:7).

Anne’s 1975 political conference circuit wound up in November at the annual conference of the NZ Association of Child Care Centres (NZACCC), an organisation founded by Sonja Davies in 1963.⁴ The NZACCC had been a lonely political voice for government funding support for centres and qualifications for staff. In 1975 the organisation found itself amidst a tide of support from various women’s organisations including key people across the early childhood world (May, 2003). Norah Fryer was also attending her first conference. In Christchurch she was involved in setting up a centre at the Christchurch Technical Institute.

⁴ This organisation has had various name changes: New Zealand Childcare Association with the later addition of the Māori name Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa, and in 2015 this was changed to Te Rito Maioho – Early Childhood New Zealand.

My lasting memory is of Anne Smith and her dream of wanting a recognised qualification for anyone who worked with children. Anne gave us this beautiful dream of what she would like in her ten year plan for childcare. I can remember being a bit apprehensive and saying, ‘That sounds wonderful, but what can I take back to the people in Christchurch to do today?’ From there I got involved in the training committee [as did Anne].⁵

Both Anne and Norah were subsequently elected onto the NZACCC Executive. Not waiting for government to establish a qualification childcare, the organisation had established its own field based training, funded in its early years through Lottery grants and voluntary tutors. Anne’s involvement lent considerable academic respectability to the idea of childcare training.

International Women’s Year: establishing a childcare centre

Anne’s attendance at the NZACCC conference had been at the invitation of colleagues she had met on the Dunedin home front: Pat Hubbard and Phyllis Levitt, both of whom had some international experience of childcare. All three women were members of the Dunedin Women’s Collective for whom issues concerning women and childcare were high on the agenda. This was the origin of the Dunedin Community Childcare Centre the foundation centre of the Dunedin Community Childcare Association that celebrated its 40th jubilee in 2015. The Women’s Collective attended an IWY Committee meeting in Dunedin.

We knew there was government money for International Women’s Year and so we decided to break through this seemingly impossible barrier of how did you get started. We applied and became Dunedin’s project for IWY. The temerity of it! Fairly amazing really!⁶

In the event, there was a groundswell of community support. Ewing Stevens, a charismatic Methodist Minister chaired the establishment committee. Anne recalled

He was extremely good at getting the public on side. It was amazing. We held a public meeting and there were 250 people there. That was quite extraordinary to get 250 people out to a public meeting. He used to talk on the radio, and he pulled those people in, including a number of prominent men, but we did most of the donkey-work.⁷

⁵ Interview with Norah Fryer, 2003

⁶ Interview with Pat Hubbard, 1994

⁷ Interview with Anne Smith, 1994

There was much debate about the centre's philosophy and operational practices.

We wanted it to be for everyone, but it was more of a feminist thing for women who wanted or had to work. We also had quality principles that we wanted too. We had some ideals about it being for children too... We talked about parent involvement. We would use psychology to plan an environment that we felt was good for kids. We were talking about training and ratios and paying the staff properly. We believed that we should have quality for the staff as well. That was the most difficult in the long run, because there was virtually nothing by way of government subsidy.⁸

Pat was appointed the first director of the centre. In accord with its feminist origins the parents and management chose not to fundraise.

We were really committed against it. We didn't run raffles or run cake stalls or any of those sorts of things. We just appealed for money. We discovered all the politicians... I spoke to lots of meetings as part of IWY and the whole education process. I remember a few appalling meetings of men's organisations where it became clear that the threat was that their wives might want to use the centre. One man became absolutely enraged...

Feminist principles also shaped the programme:

The non-sexist programme we tried to run was very important from the beginning because of IWY and feminism. I had long talks with Marie Bell who was on a committee for producing non-sexist books. Marie was one of the earliest official visitors.⁹

The new centre struggled for survival in a policy context that was not inclusive of childcare, but it also flourished as a site of: community activism, support for parents, feminist endeavour; and engagement with the latest ideas on quality early childhood practice. Not surprisingly, the centre became the site of Anne's first research forays into early childhood (Smith, 1980). She summed up the experience as, 'really quite exciting because it got me involved in the national politics of childcare but it also shaped my academic work. My own children never benefited from that project, but my work, no doubt, did.'¹⁰

In the aftermath of 1975

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Interview with Pat Hubbard, 1994

¹⁰ Ibid

International Women's Year was followed in 1976 by the Prime Minister's Conference on Women in Social and Economic Development. Continuing the momentum the conference addressed the need for a national childcare policy (Committee on Women, 1976). The syndicate 'Women and the Care of Children' syndicate was led by Geraldine McDonald and Rosslyn Noonan. A position paper, *Child-care: Facts, Principles and Problems*, was prepared by the Government's Committee on Women. The key statement was:

Whether or not a mother should go out to work or remain at home to care for her children is a decision to be made by the woman concerned...She should ideally be able to make a free choice between the two...the lack of adequate child care centres means that a mother does not really have a free choice between working in the home and in paid employment (Committee on Women (1976: 8).

What had emerged was a group of women who were now orchestrating a campaign that positioned early childhood issues in relation to the role of women on the political agenda. Anne summed up the mood:

It brought together a diverse group of women from all over the country. The fact that we were able to get close to a consensus was influential. This link of feminism with early childhood was very important, because I didn't see it happening overseas where early childhood people had this very nice image, and they wouldn't be too loud. Yet in New Zealand these people were deciding to speak with a clear voice. They began saying that this is important work women are doing that isn't valued, and it isn't getting nearly as much funding as other levels in the education system. We began to get what Anne Meade has called, 'a cumulative discourse'. I know the origin of the childcare movement went back to Sonja Davies in the 1960s, but the mid-1970s brought it together.¹¹

In 1977, with both Anne and Pat on the Executive, and at the behest of Anne, the NZACCC sponsored Bettye Caldwell's visit to New Zealand. Caldwell was a high profile advocate of the benefits of quality childcare (Caldwell, 1967, 1972). She had established the first federally funded infant daycare programme at the University of Syracuse, New York, as a research project funded under Head Start. The programme operated for economically deprived infants and their mothers, and successfully demonstrated benefits for the children and their families (Caldwell, 1967). It also demonstrated what a quality day care programme for infants and toddlers might mean in terms of a curriculum for children and a training

¹¹ Interview with Anne Smith, 1994

programme for adults (Honig & Lally, 1972). Caldwell's visit was a boost for childcare advocates and activists. Framed around an interview with Caldwell, Anne undertook her first film production: *You Can't Afford to be Casual about Childcare* (1978). Against the backdrop of the new Dunedin centre, Caldwell tells prospective parents what to look for in selecting a childcare centre, and assures them that a quality centre will be beneficial for their children.

Caldwell worked hard during her tour of NZ, visiting the Ministers of Education and Social Welfare appearing on television and radio and addressing meetings. University academics were keen to arrange meetings and Caldwell's visit demonstrated that opinion had shifted, even if the political will for change was slow. The NZACCC paid tribute to her for the support she gave them in dispelling the myths of childcare. As Caldwell stated:

In any field of endeavour a set of myths and beliefs can develop, which, in time, are reacted to as though they are hard core facts. How can we in early childhood protect children and ourselves from the effects of premature and over-zealous espousal in adequately tested ideas? (cited in Lamb, 1978).

Meantime, progress on the political front was tortuous. Recommendation 32 from the 1976 Conference on Women in Social and Economic Development had asked the Minister of State Services:

...to arrange as a matter of priority for the State Services Commission to take all necessary steps in consulting [a list of Government Departments]...to devise an effective administration for policies relating to early childhood care and education. That in doing this there be full consultation with women's organisations, municipal authorities and interested voluntary organisations with a view to rationalising local provision of early childhood care and education within a national framework (Committee on Women 1976: 17):

Thus began a long saga, told elsewhere (McDonald, 1981) of the State Services Commission (SSC) Report *Early Childhood Care and Education* (1980); eventually released in 1981 then shelved by a National Government in 1982. It is a tribute to the tenacious guardianship of Geraldine McDonald that the Report emerged in the form it did. The recommendations, were that:

- There be three early childhood services [playcentre, kindergarten and childcare] with administrative responsibility in the Department of Education;

- There be 'equitable' funding for childcare and that this be based not on the 'welfare' principle but on the principle of a contribution to a recognised service;
- The government subsidise up to 50% of the cost to parents.

The shelving of these recommendations caused an outcry of frustration by childcare advocates, similarly expressed by Anne (*NZ Listener*, 18 September 1982):

...it is hard to accept that all the patient restrained work since the early 1970s is to be set aside; that all the 'expert' and grass roots support, reports and recommendations are to be ignored.

This crisis ends the first instalment of the 'adventures of Anne'. Subsequent chapters in this volume make evident that there are later instalments of the story. We know now that the SSC Report was a watershed in the politics of childcare, and an iconic example of advocacy. The Report acknowledged the benefits of childcare for families and society and proposed a policy framework for including childcare within the education sector. The recommendations subsequently spearheaded the rollercoaster initiatives of the 1984-1990 Labour Government. All of the women named above were key players in the journey, still underway.

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