

Enduring lessons for current times from a forgotten Froebelian foot soldier in Aotearoa-New Zealand:

Miss Isabel Little (1876-1937)

Helen May

Abstract

Miss Isabel Little was a Scottish infant teacher who immigrated to New Zealand in 1912. She was **described as a “Froebel trained Scot from Edinburgh” and known around Wellington education circles for her “modern methods”**. **In contrast to known Froebelian pioneers, Miss Little’s historical footprint is light** but the few glimpses yield insights useful to consider in current times. Miss Little is described in this article as a forgotten Froebelian foot soldier who, like others were the mainstay of a kindergarten movement that transformed the early education of children. Individual and collective advocacy, as demonstrated by Miss Little a century ago, are evident in current times. The political and pedagogical context of early years education has changed in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) but there are still battles to be won. Coinciding with the consequences of **COVID-19 in 2020 was the government’s intended roll-out of *He Taonga te Tamaiti – Early learning action plan 2019-2029***, creating calls for a strategic rethink: to hasten rather than slow down its implementation. Connecting these stories, past and present, was **accidental as they collided into the space of the author’s life during a stern lockdown that mainly halted the virus at the border**. More broadly they epitomize the stretch and potency of Froebelian principles across centuries and places.

Keywords

New Zealand, Froebelian, teachers, pedagogy, kindergarten, COVID-19

Introduction

Froebelian scholarship has been proactive in documenting the advocacy of women who created Froebelian spaces across the **institutions of education**. **These visible “movers and shakers” have been honored** but less attention accorded the mainly forgotten foot soldiers of the kindergarten movement. They were the significant presence in kindergartens, nurseries and schools for young children, and also agents of change. Their presence and actions are in the shadows of the few recorded in the history books (May, Nawrotski & Prochner, 2016; Taylor Allen 2017; May & Bethell, 2017;

Palmer & Read, 1921). Lessons can be learnt from frontline teachers who, challenged rules, mentored others and joined collective action. While the remembered voices of political advocacy and pedagogical innovation are crucial to change (May, 2019), it is the frontline teacher who transforms the theory and rhetoric into practice thus making acceptable, a wider movement of change. The political and pedagogical contexts of early education have changed in NZ but there are still barriers confronting the sector on a journey to equal status for teachers, equal rights for children and equitable funding for different early childhood

education (ECE) services for children from birth to school age at 5 years. A useful exemplar of the stretch of Froebelian principles and practices across centuries, continents and places is *The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and early childhood practice* (Bruce et. al, 2019). The compilation of chapters examine past endeavors of people inspired by Froebelian ideals alongside case studies of frontline teachers in current times, often in challenging environments, refreshing and refueling **Froebel's** ideals and cumulatively forging change. It is the overlapping and interplay of Froebelian education across historic times and current times that have enabled its adaptation and indeed survival.

Miss Isabel Little (1836-1937) was a Froebelian foot soldier and the few glimpses afforded yield insights useful to consider in current times. Miss Little immigrated to New Zealand in 1912 in the wake of another family member. **She was described to me as a “Froebel trained Scot from Edinburgh” by Miss Moira Gallagher**, a retired teacher I interviewed in 1990 who played a key role in implementing the postwar expansion of kindergarten.¹ As a probationary teacher in 1929 Miss Gallagher had been inspired by Miss Little, known around **Wellington education circles for her “modern methods” in the infant classroom. Later** research revealed more glimpses (May 2011), but it was the opportunity to present a paper at the International Froebel Society (IFS) conference at Moray House in Edinburgh that encouraged further investigation, after discovering that Miss Little gained her teaching certificate at Moray House in 1898.² The conference was cancelled due to COVID, but a six-week lockdown provided space to collate and consider the threads of **Miss Little's life in education (May, 2020)**. Like other Froebelians, her activism extended beyond

the classroom with glimpses of wider engagement on behalf of women and children in various organizations. Colliding into this lockdown space, however, were the realities of the consequences for children and families of COVID; but witnessing too the response of the Wellington regional kindergarten association, He **Whānau Manaaki**, to ensure a kindergarten presence at home for children and support for their families (May & Coulston 2021).

A background to these happenings was **the concern that COVID's economic** crisis might delay the implementation of *He Taonga te Tamaiti – Early learning action plan 2019-2029* (ELAP) (Ministry of Education, 2019) released in December 2019. The plan was the result of collective negotiations across early childhood groups with a Labour-led government, elected in 2017, that promised to reinstate commitments over funding, regulations and qualifications halted and/or undermined by the previous National government 2008-2017. Suddenly, due to COVID the ELAP was under threat and a new conversation was needed (Dalli, May & Meade 2020a, 2020b); thus the collision of stories, past and present, which frame this article in an interplay of policy and pedagogy.

Some context regarding early education and kindergarten is outlined, firstly from the times of Miss Little when school was the main frontline of early education, and more recently when most children participate in ECE prior to school and kindergarten is one of a range of ECE services. More substantively, there is the unravelling of **Miss Little's story, revealing the** ethos of an era that witnessed the growth of a kindergarten movement alongside the infusion of new education ideas in schools (May, 2011). Finally, there is commentary on ECE politics **amidst COVID in 2020 and the call for a “reset”** (Mitchell, 2021). It was the lockdown collision

and fusion of past and present that suggested links across time: considering teachers as advocates for children and families, forging innovation in pedagogy, and the resetting of policy agendas. More broadly the overlapping and interplay of these stories suggest the potency and stretch of Froebelian ideals and principles across time and place.

Early years education in NZ

The idea of the Froebelian kindergarten arrived in the colonial settlement of NZ in the 1870s, initially within in a few progressive schools. A national school system was established in 1877 for children from 5 years, compulsory from 7 years. Children from 5 to 7 years were in infant classes and, except in small schools, under the semi-autonomous oversight of an infant mistress. From the 1880s, several free kindergartens were established by philanthropic organizations as an education experiment to remove children from the streets. While there was pedagogical interest and political support for kindergartens including a small government subsidy from 1909, education policy dictated a demarcation between compulsory schooling and the independent kindergarten movement (May & Bethell, 2017). Shades of this remain. Government now regulates and funds a range of ECE services, but unlike schools, they are independent of government ownership run by a mix of private and community-based operators and organizations.

Unlike schools that only adopted selected kindergarten activities, free kindergartens ran full Froebelian programs. By the early 20th century teachers were assimilating ideas from Dewey and Montessori; **abandoning Froebel's more prescriptive** activities, although not his broader principles of play and understandings of childhood (May &

Bethell, 2017). Change was harder in schools with large classes that did not allow the movement required of kindergarten or Montessori activities. Nevertheless, there was a view that regimented schools must change. When George Hogben was appointed Inspector General in 1899, he set about reforming the curriculum urging that:

The important thing is not the amount of things that are taught, but the spirit, character, and method of teaching in relation to its purpose of developing the **child's powers ...** We must believe with **Froebel and other enlightened world's** educators, that the child will learn best, not so much by reading about things in books as by doing; that is exercising his natural activities by making things, by observing and testing things for himself; and then afterwards by reasoning about them and expressing thoughts about them.³

Miss Little arrived in NZ in the **aftermath of Hogben's reforms, although the primacy of the 3R's was still upheld.** Hogben's aspirations slowly transformed schooling for young children, a process in which Miss Little played a part. At an education conference in 1944 the Minister of Education, Rex Mason, announced:

Nothing short of a revolution has taken place in the infant room over the past 20 years. It has my full support. We must agree that the learning of formal intellectual skills is of secondary **importance... he should learn to work** and play with other children and his mind should be kept lively and eager and full of wonder (Mason 1944, p. 16).

The “revolution” was an exaggeration nevertheless an era of “playway” at school was endorsed (May, 2011). The conference also determined that kindergarten be fully supported. In 1948 Miss Gallagher, was appointed the first Preschool Officer in the Wellington Head Office Department of Education with a brief to transform the creaking charitable kindergarten movement. Kindertartens became a flagship institution across NZ. Other ECE services were gradually established to meet new needs, such as childcare for working mothers, playcenters run by parents, Māori language immersion centers, Ngā Kohanga Reo and bilingual Pacific Islands centers. The political and pedagogical story of these transformations is characterized by advocacy (May, 2019).

Fast-forwarding to the end of the 20th century and the infant/junior classes had been integrated into the upper primary school and professional links with kindergarten, evident in the times of Miss Little, had faded. There were other shifts in the ECE landscape. After decades of advocacy, firstly by kindertartners, later from childcare, there was the introduction in 1988 of early childhood diploma/degree qualifications equivalent to primary teachers. These cemented the integrity of early childhood pedagogy and integrated kindergarten and childcare understandings of ECE, enriching kindergarten pedagogy, albeit with some loss of kindergarten identity. Administrative reforms in the 1980s brought childcare under the umbrella of education with a unified regulatory and funding framework, intended to redress inequity across the ECE sector and between ECE and school, but were never fully implemented (May, 2019).

The release of the bicultural curriculum, *Te Whāriki* in 1993 (Ministry of Education, 2017), further enhanced the distinctiveness of early childhood pedagogy. Developed in partnership

with Ngā Kohanga Reo Trust on behalf of indigenous Māori, *Te Whāriki* translates as a woven mat for all to stand on with many possible patterns. **Anne Meade’s, description is useful** (Meade, 2019):

For over 20 years, the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*, has expanded the existing influence of Froebel in New Zealand’s early education through its **four principles... . They are to empower** the child to learn and grow; integrate the wider world of *family and community* in to the curriculum; foster respectful reciprocal *relationships* for children with people, places and things; and implement a curriculum that reflects the *holistic* way that children learn. These principles are also found in traditional Māori knowledge (p. 127).

Kindertartens also infused their Froebelian roots within *Te Whāriki* as a movement underpinned by advocacy for children, social justice, community outreach and including a profession of qualified teachers. Froebelian pedagogy is evident too in the emphasis on purposeful play, outdoor environments, creative arts and family engagement.

The development of *Te Whāriki* and its cross-sector acceptance is a success story of advocacy, foot soldier implementation and collaboration (May & Carr, 2016). The current **ECE political journey colliding into Miss Little’s** story in 2020 is more fraught and a consequence of shifting interests across the political **spectrum. After Labour’s election in 1999 the** ECE strategic plan, *Pathways to the Future 2002-2012* (Ministry of Education, 2002), brought significant gains with the introduction of free ECE for 3 and 4 year olds, and the move to 100% qualified teachers, already upheld by

kindergarten, but inclusive of childcare. Again, the incoming National Government in 2008 halted these gains and cut funding to centers **that had reached 100%. Labour's current** ELAP (2019-2029) reinstates the cuts and proposes a swathe of initiatives to address historic inequities in relation to the wellbeing of children, the professional status of teachers and access for families. Early education has been a political roller coaster with challenges for teachers and organizations in different settings across the century, but there is also continuity in the Froebelian legacy.

A classroom teacher

Immediately after Miss Gallagher's appointment as Preschool Officer in 1948 she visited every kindergarten. Kindergartens had periods of free play but were still regimented. Miss Gallagher determined to persuade teachers to introduce more freedom. Miss Joyce Barns recalled the visit:

We let the children free because Miss Gallagher said it was more natural. We **didn't have a timetable, We let them free** to do what they wanted. We let the big boys go outside. You could see them sitting on the mat bored to tears. They played outside, nearly all morning and the difference in them! We even let them go to the toilet when they wanted to.⁴

Miss Gallagher recounted her own introduction to new education ideas in 1929 when she was a probationary teacher at Karori School, Wellington, under the supervision of Miss **Little, who Miss Gallagher said "led the way" for** others:

There was a wonderful woman called Isobel Little. She was a Froebel trained Scot from Edinburgh and taught me the

whole understanding of children and how they learned. She was doing what was called an activity program.

I will describe my classroom. Instead of rows of desks I had 3 tables placed around the room. We had matting on the floor and play activity in the morning where children had a free choice. They were fresher then in terms of energy and creativity . . . We had wooden templates of all sorts and sizes, a hangover from Montessori; a table with picture books, paper and crayons. We did sewing. There were shelves with curtains, and the children had free access to them. They could do anything we thought would help them.⁵

Inspector's reports confirm the presence of both women at Karori School, but there was little indication of anything radical:

The infant department is well organised and efficiently conducted. The physical instruction and rhythmic exercises are particularly good. Probationer is receiving careful attention.⁶

Miss Little was adept at adjusting her program to fit the expectations of orderliness and competence in the 3Rs, however when she left:

The inspectors came in the next Monday **and said, "There is going to be no more of that nonsense." We were told to get on with** the serious business of learning. I just carried on with my wicked ways!⁷

Possibly, the inspectors did not think Miss **Little's playful program** appropriate for a probationary teacher. Miss Gallagher continued to experiment: allowing more choice, introducing new activities and teaching reading based on the children's interests and drawings. She also invited parents into the classroom.

Miss Gallagher's recollections provided the clue to Miss Little's Froebelian training and her ability to inspire younger teachers and manage careful subversion; adopted by Miss Gallagher and Miss Barns who later became the Principal of the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA).

An enquiry to the University of Edinburgh yielded **Isabel Little's Moray House records. She had "virtually perfect" punctuality, "excellent skills in teaching" and "exemplary" conduct and was examined on the advanced knowledge of all school subjects. Handwritten on Miss Little's record are the names of two schools where she taught: Musselburgh and Stockbridge.**⁸ There are no further clues about her teaching in Edinburgh.

What prompted Miss Little to study for National Froebel Union Higher Certificate at the Froebel Educational Institute, London, is unclear. A Froebel Society had been operating in Edinburgh from 1894 and the first free kindergarten had opened 1903. The Froebel Union archives at Roehampton University, list Miss Little as a private student who sat exams prior to leaving Scotland in 1912, and her finals in NZ later that year.⁹ The Froebel qualification was quite different in focus to her earlier teaching certificate with subjects such as: free expression, educational handwork, practice of education, principles of education along with drawing, singing, hygiene and nature study, reflecting the skills and knowledge of kindergarten teaching.¹⁰

Miss Little next appears in 1914 as an assistant infant teacher at Thorndon Normal School, Wellington, a training school for teachers. For the next six years she gains only a brief mention by inspectors citing **Miss Little's teaching as "very satisfactory", "good" and "very good". An overall report for 1914 noted that, "in**

all infant classes without exception children are bright and responsive."¹¹ **Miss Little's experience and qualifications would justify her appointment to Thorndon Normal School. Prior to 1914 the school had housed the training college and a kindergarten. The Kelburn Normal School and Training College in Wellington opened in 1914 and Miss Dorothy Fitch, the Thorndon Kindergarten and Infant Mistress, was transferred to establish the new venture that started only with infant classes and in buildings designed to showcase modern methods. Miss Fitch was active in campaigns for improved conditions for women teachers and young children and a member of the fledgling WFKA, suggesting that Miss Little began her teaching career in NZ amidst a lively network of progressive teachers.**

In 1921, Miss Little was appointed infant mistress at the Hutt District School. The only record of her 2 years there was an inspector's **report stating: "The infant department has a thoroughly sound foundation laid in all subjects. Modern methods are used and pleasing progress was made. A fine example of the work is the kind and responsiveness to the little ones."**¹² In 1923 T. B. Strong, Chief Inspector of Primary Schools, criticized the **"stagnant educational thought" he perceived in "some quarters" and blamed "certain head-teachers, who had grown out of touch with modern methods" and were "damping the enthusiasm" of new teachers.** Comparing the qualities of older and newer teaching methods, Strong stated:

The former made the child the passive recipient, the unwilling storehouse of as much information as the teacher could induce him, or alas! force him to hold. The new methods of teaching aim at securing the co-operation of the child, mainly through the interest that certain subjects possess in themselves, or through the

satisfaction gained in acquiring knowledge by self effort.¹³

Miss Little would have agreed. In 1924 Miss Little was the infant mistress at South Wellington School and cited in a memoir of Elsie Andrews (1888-1948) found in the archives of the NZ Educational Institute - Te Tui Roa (NZEI) union for teachers.¹⁴ Miss Andrews was **involved in the Women's Teachers Association** (WTA) an affiliated advocacy organization founded in 1901 (Burton, 1986), with links to the Wellington Froebel Society and the National Council of Women (NCW), an umbrella organization for women's groups. **In 1924 Miss Andrews was the infant mistress at Fitzroy School in New Plymouth and given leave to observe "modern methods" at Kelburn Normal School and Wellington South where she described:**

A little Scottish woman ... in a large room with small chairs here and there around the walls, mats scattered over the floors and no desks. This was a startling **phenomenon. "Where are your desks?" I asked. She replied, "I pushed them under the school."** She continued, – "On cold mornings I often break one up and burn it". – Seeds of revolt began to burgeon in my soul! (Cited in Burton, 1986, p. 68).

This is a glimpse of a resourceful and **defiant Miss Little. The 1925 inspector's report** gives a hint of her ability to keep onside with **inspectors' expectations:**

Miss Little is a capable infant mistress. She secures harmony and efficient work in her department in addition to teaching a large class. Her outlook is modern. A fine tone prevails. Approved schemes of work are used.¹⁵

The 1926 report, however, cites the concern that, **"the probationers have not been trained and instructed according to requirements"**,¹⁶ possibly suggesting that, like Miss Gallagher at Karori, Miss Little was allowing her probationary teachers too much freedom.

Miss Little left no written records on her education views or experiences, unlike Miss Winifred Maitland, who was appointed headmistress of Kelburn Normal School in 1915 after the retirement of Miss Fitch. Miss Maitland was also a graduate of the Froebel Educational Institute and under her leadership the school gained a high reputation. She wrote:

Society demands that a child in order to be an effective citizen should be master of the arts of reading, writing and arithmetic. These are, however, only the instruments **of education ... it is important that they** should not monopolise a place on the timetable out of proportion with other equally important aspects (Cited in McCallum & Sullivan, 1990, p. 27).

Miss Maitland was critical of the schools **that restricted "expression unnaturally", noting too that, "Of course the inspectors paid their periodic visits to see that the three R's, the tools of education, were not overlooked" (ibid. p. 81).** Like Miss Little, inspectors gave praise as long as playful methods did not result in poor discipline or lagging in the 3Rs. This was the tightrope progressive teachers had to manage.

These glimpses of Miss Little in her prime as an infant mistress provide an insight into her Froebelian understandings of modern methods in the early 20th century. Miss Little may have been forgotten by history, but nevertheless made sufficient impact for several teachers to cite her influence. Her classroom legacy was the modelling of new methods,

mentoring her staff and choosing battles carefully with education officialdom.

Community Engagement

Characteristic of Froebelian teachers, Miss Little engaged in a range of endeavors beyond the classroom. She was active in her school community. News reports cite her involvement in fundraising and social activities.¹⁷ She gains mention too for establishing home and school associations involving parents in the school beyond the elected few on school committees.¹⁸ Outside school, Miss Little was involved in professional associations and social networks, such as the Pioneer Club established in 1909 because women could not join the Wellington Club.¹⁹ Its first president was Miss Mary Richmond who founded the WFKA. Pertinent to this article are glimpses of her presence in education organizations, shedding light on some campaigns and concerns of teachers of young children.

Soon after her appointment to Thorndon Normal School Miss Little presented a **paper on “Education in Scotland” to the WTA** published in *The Dominion* (6 June 1914). She described the five free kindergartens in **Edinburgh noting that, “In the kindergartens and schools of Scotland all pictures that were not beautiful had been banished”. This Froebelian–** like act was about creating spaces for children **filled with beauty and nature. Miss Little’s** description of the reforming Edinburgh kindergartens would resonate with Wellington kindergartners:

So many slum children are turned out to the street to play at the age of three ... They pick up all manner of evil ... Now he **is packed into a kindergarten ...** He dances, sings, plays, goes exploring or

walking to the park, where the birds sing and build their nests, see the trees and other delights only hitherto known to the middle-class child.

Miss Little outlined the introduction of new education ideas into Scottish schools, echoing beliefs of progressive educators that legislation and philanthropy had failed to solve social problems:

Many thinkers have decided that the future of our nation is in the hands of the teacher. Teachers have become more and more persuaded that the child must be educated through his activities.

Infant classrooms in Edinburgh had no formal teaching for the first six months of school **and no “drill”, claimed Miss Little.** There were **“periods set aside for story-telling, singing, dancing, games and handwork ... We also give time for drawing, allowing at least three periods a week...one for drawing objects, one for nature illustration, and one for story illustrating.”** The Froebelian influence is again evident and comparable to pockets of progressive teaching in New Zealand.

Under the auspices of the WTA Infant Mistresses groups were established, conducting their own advocacy through submissions, remits and meetings with the education bureaucracy. In 1922 the Wellington Infant Mistresses Group **forwarded the following remits to WTA’s** national conference:

1. That in all new infant and main school buildings provision should be made for assembly halls, separate cloak room, and lunchroom, and windows in keeping with modern ideals of education.
2. That the Department of Education should manufacture and supply

kindergarten material as suits NZ schools and conditions.

3. That no class in the infant department should have more than 25 children.
4. That the Education Department recognize the extra qualifications of infant teachers holding the Higher Froebel Certificate.²⁰

One can imagine Miss Little supporting Remit No 4, as she held this qualification. More broadly, the WTA focused its concerns on discriminatory employment practices for women teachers including the absence of women school inspectors, a situation not remedied until the **1950s. Records show Miss Little's attendance at WTA conferences, and occasionally speaking; one of the associations many supportive foot soldiers, but she did not assume overly political roles.**

Miss Little was also active within NZEI, the professional union representing primary teachers. In 1930, she was a Wellington delegate to the annual conference and mentioned twice in reports. Firstly, in support of a motion to reduce class sizes where, possibly aware of heightened interest in Montessori Miss Little explained as: **“One of the outstanding reforms needed in our education system... with children arriving at school when the average child had not learned control.” This was difficult to learn in large classes, claimed Miss Little.**²¹ The WTA and NZEI independently and collectively campaigned over class sizes, a task hindered by Depression cutbacks in the 1930s, war in the 1940s and a baby boom across the 1950s-1960s. **At NZEI's 1930 conference Miss Little supported an increase in grants to keep schools hygienically clean, critical about the “insanitary condition of many rooms in which children were taught.”**²² In the worsening economic situation this did not happen. Budgets and salaries were cut. Not until after the election of the first Labour Government

in 1935 was there a turnaround in the financial fortunes of schools.

Kindergarten Politics

After retiring in 1934 at age 58, Miss Little was appointed to the Council of the WFKA, a position she held until her death in 1937. In 1936 WFKA established its seventh kindergarten and the few years Miss Little spent with WFKA saw growing support for the movement across the political and education spectrum. Miss Little was not a key player in the politics that played out, but contributed her skills and connections where needed. She joined the Council as the Depression years were easing and witnessed the election of a Labour Government with a transformational agenda of social reform in which kindergarten would have a role.

The previous government had removed its kindergarten subsidy in 1931, creating **headlines of a “National Disaster”.**²³ This halted all kindergarten expansion but also swelled public support. NZEI passed a resolution that, **“In view of the results of the work done, the Institute regards the relatively small cost as more in the nature of a saving rather than an expenditure.”**²⁴ *Wellington's Evening Post* launched an appeal and gave space to protest letters, including one from Miss Richmond emphasizing the progressive ideals of kindergarten work:

The Free Kindergarten Council ... fully appreciates the serious financial condition of the country... They ask that the subsidy not be entirely withdrawn or we should lose our status as part of the education system, and - if we cease to function, many working-class mothers would lose enlightened help at a most difficult time ... We plead with the

Department to reconsider, and not sever completely the tie that binds us.²⁵

Peter Fraser, who became the Minister of Education in 1935, reminded Parliament of, **“the work of the kindergartens in these difficult times in supplying food, fresh air, and sunlight to children for whom parents could not adequately provide.”**²⁶ He reinstated the subsidy in 1935 and government support significantly increased thereafter.

In 1935, Miss Little was a WFKA delegate to the Wellington branch of the NCW²⁷ accompanied by Miss Maud England, a long-time Council member and founder of the branch in 1917. The pair also represented WFKA at the NCW Annual Conference in 1935, and in 1936, were delegates at the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union (NZFKU) Conference. Miss England was an instigator of the Union, established in 1926 as national advocacy organization. They made a good team; while Miss Little was new to the politics of kindergarten, she was experienced in the operations of education organizations. Responding to the groundswell of cumulative support Minister Fraser addressed the kindergarten delegates:

I am anxious to know in a practical way, how we can extend kindergarten education what is the scope of your ideas in the future? ... I want to be in a position to judge how far your organisation can carry out the work and whether as at present constituted it can carry it out.²⁸

These were heady times, cut short for Miss Little who died suddenly in 1937, just missing two significant events she would have **attended: WFKA’s planned celebrations of the centenary of Froebel’s birth and the**

international New Education Fellowship Conference, that spearheaded an era of education reform. Schools were closed and 5000 teachers, including kindergarteners attended. Miss Little did not witness the subsequent expansion of the kindergarten movement under the Department of Education in partnership with NZFKU, or the extension of play-based programs into all infant classrooms. She disappears from the records, mainly forgotten. Her protégée, Miss Gallagher, with Miss **England served on the Government’s** Consultative Committee on Preschool Education established in 1945 to plan the blueprint for a professionally run kindergarten service that Miss Gallagher was appointed to lead. In my interview Miss Gallagher attributed Miss Little as the inspirational legacy for undertaking this **challenge. The glimpses of Miss Little’s story** provide a window on an era of pedagogical change influenced by an assimilation of Froebelian and new education ideals that began in a few classrooms and slowly moved into the mainstream. Likewise, there was the advocacy and networking that gradually created space for kindergartens on the political platform. Presidential speeches and delegations were important but so too was the staunch participation of foot soldiers such as Miss Little.

Politics of 2020

Twenty-twenty was a challenging year. **While documenting Miss Little’s story during the** lockdown, the impact of COVID on ECE services was becoming apparent. It was unfortunate timing too that the first year of the implementation of the ELAP coincided with the pandemic. This halted progress but also highlighted issues as some ECE services sprang into action to support staff, children and families while others withdrew. Suddenly new times were confronting families and ECE services. This

could be an opportunity for hastening, rather than slowing down the realisation of the ELAP.

After winning the 2017 election Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called for a **“transformational” government, likened to the 1935 Labour Government**. Early childhood leaders worked with the Ministry of Education to develop a holistic ten-year plan: completing the stalled journey to 100% qualified teachers, bridging divides between private and community owned services, redressing salary inequities for teachers, improving staffing ratios for under 3 year olds, tightening regulations around poor quality environments and improving access for families. Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education **told the sector to “turn the tide” and be “bold” in its proposals** (Hipkins, 2018). During 2018-19, other education groups gained new funding and large salary increases, including kindergarten teachers who, as public servants, maintained pay parity with primary and secondary teachers. This did not apply to teachers in the childcare sector, left languishing. **The Minister’s assurance** in 2019 was that 2020 was the turn of early childhood.

The 2020 Budget was released during the lockdown and focused primarily on the COVID emergency. There were two early childhood initiatives: the starting salary of degree-qualified teachers in childcare would be the same as their kindergarten counterparts; and funding subsidies for centers with 100% qualified staff, cut under the previous government, would be restored. These were gains, but miniscule compared to the billions of dollars rolled out for the COVID recovery, including a fund for so-called **“shovel ready” infrastructure projects, such as roads and bridges intended to create work opportunities**.²⁹ The promised investment in ECE had been diverted, not with the consequences of **the 1931 “National Disaster” but nevertheless dashing expectations**.

Meanwhile, beneath the political spotlight of COVID, lockdown and Budget something interesting was happening. Some early childhood teachers, in lockdown themselves, were discovering the potential of the home as the site of ECE. Parents became the frontline educators with support from teachers while the teachers embraced extended roles in welfare support. A documented exemplar is the experience of He **Whānau Manaaki Kindergarten Association** (HWM) operating 102 kindergartens, an expanded organization from the time of Miss Little when kindergarten teachers were also frontline workers in times of crisis. Selective quotations from kindergarten interviewees in this COVID study (May & Coulston, 2021) are revealing of the mix of advocacy, innovation, courage and commitment from an organization and its teachers that determined kindergarten must remain operational.

CEO:

*We are a kindergarten profession focussed on doing the best for children. This was an exceptional time and we needed to do the job differently using the systems we had but extending further. In the past, children and families came into the kindergarten to contribute their knowledge and experience within the kindergarten environment. The lockdown turned kindergarten on its head. Teachers had to enter into a virtual scene engaging with learning happening in the home. **Te Whāriki permeates throughout this.** Its principles, strands and goals require us to work in holistic ways. Teachers found they could do things they never thought they could do and to think about new possibilities (p. 11).*

Senior manager:

*This was kindergarten in new times. We are part of the community not the other way around. We have to model **this. We couldn't lockdown too. Our team knew our families would be struggling. If we don't run our services what does this mean?*** (p. 4).

Teachers:

I spent a lot of time making phone calls to see what families needed and arranging deliveries. For some families there was panic. We have a counselling role as kindergarten teachers but this was much bigger. Our first job was making sure our kindergarten families were OK and then we considered the kind of kindergarten programme we could offer at home (p. 6).

We were encouraging our families to share what they were doing. They started to inspire each other as a kindergarten community of learning. It was a lovely way of connecting and it became a spiral of families and children contributing (p. 8).

*We were **finding more about children's interests at home than ever before** which guided us with ideas so that we could be supporting their learning even if we were not physically there. There were more in-depth conversations to make the **children's learning more visible** to parents who could see that what they were doing at home was valuable* (p. 8).

Teachers enacted kindergarten traditions of community service. Lessons learned by teachers in extraordinary times were that collaborative partnerships with families could be strengthened in new ways. There were political

lessons too as COVID highlighted the value of early childhood institutions within the social and economic infrastructure. A national survey of the impact of COVID on ECE centers concluded that **“particularly** community-based services played a pivotal role in brokering social, health, and financial support for families who needed help...[and] acted as a crucial service supporting essential workers” (Mitchell et.al. 2020, p. 5).

Mitchell suggested the potential for policy transformation, arguing that, **“Now is a good time to rethink the purpose of ECE, to redefine ECE as a public good, and to plan and support it accordingly”** (ibid. p. 7). Mitchell had long-held concerns about the growing presence of private-for profit ECE services operating primarily as a business rather than a service.

In the aftermath of the lockdown an election loomed. It was timely to strengthen the case. Political opinion pieces (Dalli et.al, 2020a, 2020b) promoted the argument that children were the most important infrastructure of society but had been bypassed in the **government's recovery program**. Fully implementing the ELAP, supporting children and families in their early years, was as important as economic infrastructure. Politicians were reminded that ECE **“has a blueprint for action that makes it ‘shovel-ready’ for transformation. It is as deserving of new money as roundabouts, road alignments, and bicycle paths”** (Dalli, et.al 2020a, p.7).

In October 2020, Labour won a landslide election. The challenge ahead is to convince government that the financial cost of an ECE transformation is an essential social foundation for new times. During the campaign Labour made a commitment to introduce pay parity for teachers across the childcare sector. It was pleasing that this decades-long campaign had political traction at last, but in the remaining months of 2020 there was no indication that the

new government intended to heed the call to hasten the broader aspirations of the ELAP. There is much work to do, for example, ensuring that the kind of public service and pedagogical innovation demonstrated by kindergarten and others during 2020 (Kahuroa, et. al., 2021), benefits all children. Hopefully, during 2021 the seeding of such opinions will spark the groundswell needed, as in earlier times, to realize the transformation. COVID has shown that the government can be transformational, but this needs to explicitly embrace young children and their families into the economic recovery.

Lessons of Advocacy

At the inaugural IFS conference in 2004 at the Froebel Educational Institute, where Miss Little gained her Froebel qualification, I presented an address on the **lessons of “being Froebelian” for the 21st century**. There are parallels with this article. In 2004 I stated:

Advocacy is a key driver of ECE in NZ. The roots of this advocacy stem from issues to do with political change, social reform, indigenous Maori **concerns and women’s rights... Since** the nineteenth century early childhood advocates have sought to persuade society in general and politicians in particular as to the benefits of early childhood care and education (May 2006, p. 245).

The lessons of advocacy had been learnt from 19th century kindergarteners. This paper provides glimpses of its enduring legacy, in the early 20th century in the times of Miss Little, mainly in school settings, and more recently in 2020 embracing the wider

politics of ECE including an exemplar of kindergarten in extraordinary times. While the settings and politics of the times are different there are overlapping conversations underpinned by Froebelian ideals about teachers, childhood, families and communities. Referring to current times, Julian Grenier writes in the preface to *The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice*, (Bruce, et. al. **2019): “The Froebelian approach is to develop respectful partnerships, to see community and families as assets to treasure, not problems to solve” (npn). This is evident in the overlapping stories in this paper.**

Miss Little was no radical despite **sowing “seeds of revolt” in Elsie Andrew’s “soul” but she pushed boundaries in** classroom practice and influenced others to do likewise; and beyond her classroom joined campaigns to improve the professional status of teachers of young children and the wellbeing of young children. This remained under the radar of the historical gaze and although she did not live to see later policy developments, she progressed the cause. Forging change across later decades within the expanding kindergarten movement including the burgeoning of a diverse ECE sector has required high-level political advocacy, most recently negotiating the ELAP. Equally important is the professional role of frontline teachers as pedagogues and advocates for children and families. The exemplar of kindergarten teachers, and others in COVID times, practicing new ways of being a teacher, upholds the best of Froebelian ideals. The teachers worked below the gaze of daily COVID news, nevertheless, their endeavors make visible the potential of early

childhood institutions to be transformational **in new times**. Miss Little's story as a Froebelian foot soldier was only uncovered in COVID times, the fruition of her endeavors are known. In contrast, the consequences of 2020 for early childhood policy are still unfolding as this article is written in the new year of 2021.

References

- Allen, Taylor Allen, (2017). *The Transatlantic kindergarten: Education and women's movements in Germany and the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bruce, T., Elfer, P., Powell, S., with Werth, L. (2019). *The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice: Rearticulating research, policy and practice*. UK: Routledge.
- Burton, F. (1986). The New Zealand **Women Teachers' Association 1901-1964**, unpublished paper, University of Auckland, Wellington: NZEI-TRR Library.
- Dalli, C., May, H., & Meade, A. (2020a). Early Learning Action Plan is "shovel-ready" now. *Space*, issue 61, p. 7.
- (2020b). "Let's Get Moving" Commentary on a political opinion piece. *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi - NZ Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 22 (2) 41-43.
- Hipkins, C. (2018). *Terms of Reference. Development of a 10-year strategic plan for early learning*. <http://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/consultations/Strategic-Plan-ToR.pdf>
- Kahuroa, R., Mitchell, L., Ng, O., & Johns, T. (17 January 2021). Children's working theories about Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand. *European Early Childhood Research Journal*, (pp. 1-16). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872672>
- Mason, H. G. R. (1944). *Education today and tomorrow*. Wellington: Department of Education.
- May, H. (2006). "Being Froebelian": An Antipodean analysis of the history of advocacy and early childhood. *History of Education*, 35 (2) 245-262.
- (2011). "I am five and I go to School": *The work and play of early education in New Zealand*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.
- (2019, 3rd ed.). *Politics in the Playground*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.
- (2020). "A Froebel trained 'Scot' from Edinburgh": *Miss Isabel Little (1876-1937)*. <http://www.ifsfroebel.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Miss-Isabel-Little-.pdf>
- May, H., Nawrotzki, K., & Prochner, L. (Eds.) (2016). *Kindergarten narratives on Froebelian education: Transnational investigations*. London: Bloomsbury Press.
- May, H. & Carr, M. (2016). *Te Whāriki: A uniquely woven curriculum shaping policy, pedagogy and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand*. In T. David, K. Gooch & S. Powell, (Eds.), *Handbook of philosophies and theories of early childhood education and care* (pp. 316-326). UK: Routledge.
- May, H., & Bethell, K. (2017). *Growing a kindergarten movement: Its peoples*,

purposes and politics. Wellington: NZCER Press.

May, H., & Coulston, A. (11 January, 2021). He Whānau Manaaki kindergartens, Aotearoa New Zealand: A pandemic outreach in new political times, *European Early Childhood Research Journal*, (pp. 1-14).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872675>

McCallum, J., & Sullivan, G. (1990) *Kelburn Normal School 75th Jubilee 1914-1989*. Wellington: Kelburn Normal School.

Meade, A. with Fugle, G. & McCaul, C. (1919). **A story of Froebel's global reach**. In T. Bruce, P. Elfer & S. Powell with L. Werth, (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice: Rearticulating research, policy and practice* (127-131). UK: Routledge.

Ministry of Education, (2002). *Pathways to the future - Ngā Huarahi Arataki*. Wellington: Learning Media.

(2017). *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki matauranga mo ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa - Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: NZ Government.

(2019). *He Taonga te Tamaiti – Early learning action plan 2019-2029*. Wellington: NZ Government.

Mitchell, L., Hodgen, E., Meagher-Lundberg, P., & Wells, C. (17 August 2020). *Impact of Covid-19 on the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand: Challenges and opportunities*. Hamilton: University of Waikato.

Mitchell, L. (21 January 2021). Time for a reset on early childhood education. *NZ Herald*, A31.

Palmer, A., & Read, J. (Eds.) (2021). *British Froebelian women from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first century: A community of progressive educators*. UK: Routledge.

Endnotes

¹ Interview, 1990.

² My colleague Kerry Bethell first suggested taking several **NZ kindergarten ladies 'home' to Scotland and sourced some of Miss Little's information**.

³ *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR)*, 1904, E-1C, p.2.

⁴ Interview, 1994.

⁵ Interview, 1990.

⁶ School Reports 1929, WEB, EB-W-9, Archives NZ (ANZ).

⁷ Interview, 1990.

⁸ **Record of Isabel Little, 8 July 1898'**. Edinburgh University Library archives of the Free Church Training College Moray House.

⁹ Email from archivist, Kornelia Cepok, 8 October 2019.

¹⁰ *Report of the Certificate Examiners held during the year 1912*. Office of the National Froebel Union, pp. 4-14.

¹¹ School Reports 1914-1919, WEB, EB-W-9, ANZ.

¹² School Reports 1921, WEB, EB-W-9, ANZ

¹³ *AJHR*, 1923, E-2, Appendix A, p. iii.

¹⁴ Elsie Andrews M.B.E., 1888-1948, Typescript, N.Z.W.T.A. Mss., Folder 30, NZEI-TRR.

¹⁵ School Reports 1925, WEB, EB-W-9, ANZ.

¹⁶ School Reports 1926, WEB, EB-W-9, ANZ.

¹⁷ *Evening Post*: 22 August 1922, 30 June 1924, 22 August 1924.

¹⁸ Home and School, *Evening Post*, 18 September 1929; A Plea for Interest, *Evening Post*, 30 October 1930.

¹⁹ Pioneer Club Activities, *Evening Post*, 21 May 1931.

²⁰ *Evening Post*, 8 April 1922.

²¹ An Urgent Need for Small Classes, *Evening Post*, 13 May 1930.

²² Cleaning for Schools, *Evening Post*, 14 May 1930.

²³ A National Disaster, unsourced clipping 1931, Minute book 1929–33, Dunedin Free Kindergarten Records, MS-1986-001, Hocken Collections, University of Otago.

²⁴ Appeal for Kindergarten, *Evening Post*, 10 February 1932.

²⁵ Plea for Continued Recognition, *Evening Post*, 12 February 1932.

²⁶ Free Kindergartens Criticism, 25 November 1932, unsourced clipping, Scrapbook 1931-1948, WFKA Records, MS-Group 0052, MSY 1922, Alexander Turnbull Library.

²⁷ Housing Question, *Evening Post*, 24 September 1935.

²⁸ Infant Teaching, *NZ Herald*, 19 August 1936.

²⁹ *Newshub*, 1 April 2020.

<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2020/04/government-looks-to-fund-large-shovel-ready-infrastructure-projects-after-covid-19-lockdown.html>