



Ngā kohinga kōrero a te aumangea

Kia mana te ara kōhungahunga ki Aotearoa

Life stories on the frontline

Growing a childcare movement in Aotearoa

Edited by Helen May, Arapera Card,
and Janis Carroll-Lind





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Photo 1960s

Sonja Davies, ONZ
(1923–2005)²

Life Member 1976

President 1964–1975

Patron 1995–2005

*From the very beginning, we stressed the need
for a high standard of childcare.*



Involvement in early childhood education



[In 1960] I was President of the Nelson Day Nursery Committee and very involved in the administration of this amenity which had been so splendid to [my son] Mark when he was small. Established by Dorothy Atmore, wife of Nelson's Independent MP, it was originally designed to care for the children of Red Cross and other women voluntary workers during World War II. A previous committee had built a substantial concrete building which belonged to them, on land which did not. In looking into the matter, I found to my horror that there was not even a lease, just a 'gentlemen's agreement' with the YMCA behind which the nursery was situated. We called on the Board of that organisation to try to negotiate a lease. Although they were well intentioned towards the nursery, they were not having any lease. I asked if they intended extending in the near future and they said definitely not. I was not happy but did not have much option. Then disaster struck.

In 1960, the Labour Government, in response to substantiated reports about dismal conditions in two Auckland day nurseries, drew up very quickly a set of regulations which would cover all childcare centres. Embodied in these was a requirement for two toilets for every ten children. We had only one toilet and a number of potties for the small folk and had never found this a problem. We wrote to Wellington and asked an official of the Child Welfare Department to come and talk to us. In the meantime, I approached the YMCA Board to ask if they would agree to our adding another toilet. They refused. We outlined our problem to the man from Wellington who, while sympathetic, remained adamant. We pointed out that our nursery was in reality a swept-up shoppers' crèche, only open from one o'clock to five. Many of the children stayed for only an hour or two while Mum had her hair done, went to the dentist or shopped. But he said another toilet was essential or we could not continue to operate the nursery. I was very angry. I supported quality childcare but felt this particular rule was unrealistic. By now, the General Election had seen the defeat of the second Labour Government, so I made an appointment to see the Minister of Social Welfare, the Hon D McKay. He listened to me and said he would talk to

his departmental officers although he was not hopeful. Then he remarked that I was the fifth childcare person to call on him that month with a problem! “If you were all joined together in one group,” he grumbled, “it would be easier for everyone.” Feeling he had dealt suitably with me, he saw me out. He did not know me. I went along to the Head Office of the then Department of Child Welfare, obtained the names and addresses of all childcare centre owners or committees, and went home and wrote to them proposing the formation of a National Association of Child Care Centres. There was sufficient interest for me to proceed and on 14 October 1963, the inaugural meeting of what is now the New Zealand Childcare Association was held.

The Mayor was to open the meeting but forgot and, having a rare spare afternoon, was in his vegetable garden. However, Stan Whitehead, then Deputy Mayor, was loyally there to support me and officiated saying that he had not the slightest doubt that this organisation could help women make an even bigger contribution to society. As convener of the meeting, I had prepared my opening remarks carefully. I told the meeting how I had approached both the Free Kindergarten Association and the Playcentre Federation to see whether childcare could become part of either organisation but had been firmly turned down. No one would quarrel with the need for standards being imposed on centres by Government, I said, but, bearing in mind the broad scope of private and community centres covered by the regulations, it was not difficult to see how anomalies crept in. A unified organisation would not only result in a better deal for the children, but also for those who had the responsibility of administering centres.

I had invited Minister McKay to attend but this had not been possible. However, he sent a senior Child Welfare official, Ken Hayes, to represent him, who said the Department would be pleased to see the formation of the proposed association and wished it every success. He also commented on the difficulties in trying to formulate a set of rules for such a wide range of childcare centres. Among the out-of-town delegates was a diminutive woman with short, curly black hair, intelligent eyes, big glasses and a determined expression: this was Jessie



(FAMILY COLLECTION)

Berys Scouse (1939)⁹⁴

Life Member 2001

The child is at the heart of the organisation.



Early years



My brother was nine years older so in that sense I had a solo childhood. Apparently, I was terribly shy so probably I didn't really have much contact with other young children. Even the neighbour said that when he was working in the garden, and I would be watching him underneath the hedge, he'd speak to me, but I would run inside. My mother had muscular dystrophy and was restricted in what she could do. My main early childhood memories stemmed from starting school and being with my dad. He was a captain on the ferries before the Auckland Harbour Bridge was built. I would go to work with him in the school holidays. It was my job to count the cars, bikes and trucks on each run.

We lived at Milford, close to the beach so there were interactions with children at the beach. We had a neighbour whose daughter was a beautiful pianist. Her parents had bought her a grand piano and built a music room on the front of their house. If I went missing my parents would find me under the hedge listening to the piano. My greatest wish was that I could learn the piano, but it wasn't something my parents could afford. Money was tight. The love of music is still with me today.

My dad's sister lived close to us and they had a son who was a couple of years younger than me. We ended up doing things together with his older sister. My mum came from a big family with farms in the Waikato. Every holiday we would visit. I have wonderful memories of milking cows and working the old butter churn. I feel I had a blessed childhood.

I attended Takapuna High School but at age 15 years I needed to help my mother who was finding home chores harder as the muscular dystrophy became progressively worse. When I was 16 years old my parents asked if I wanted to return to school or go out to work. I would have liked to be a kindergarten teacher but that was not affordable. I worked for a short while as a hairdresser, and then in Inland Revenue for five years. I married in 1960 and had three children. I did not know then that my ambition to be a kindergarten teacher would be fulfilled later by working in childcare.

Involvement in childcare

In 1977, by accident, I became involved in childcare. A lady who lived close to us in Glen Innes was supervising at the Auckland College of Education Child Care Centre. We had been to a school meeting. I was the President of the Parent and Teacher Association. Coming home she said, “I have to find someone to work tomorrow because one of the staff can’t come. Would you be able to do it?” That night I talked with my husband to see if this would be possible because I did not drive, and he did shift work. I helped out the next day and then it became a regular two days, then three days. When the supervisor left her job, I was asked to work full-time as supervisor until the end of the year, which I did. I continued in this role the following year and that is how I ended up working in childcare, retiring 26 years later.

In 1978 I enrolled in the part-time Childcare Certificate Course at the Auckland Technical Institute and later did a supervisor’s course at the Auckland College of Education with Maris O’Rourke who was active in childcare circles.⁹⁵ In

the early 1990s I was awarded an Equivalency Diploma of Teaching.

The childcare centre catered for children of students and staff of the Auckland Teachers’ College (as it was then). The centre was administered by a parents’ committee and had to be self-supporting due to a Department of Education directive that the College could not fund the centre. A network of other tertiary childcare centres formed a support group as we faced similar issues such as closing for holidays and only being funded when the children were present. Such issues bonded us together and we worked collaboratively as a collective to lobby for changes to benefit our centres.



Children from the College of Education Child Care Centre joined this procession, 1987



2021 (ARAPERA CARD'S PERSONAL COLLECTION)

Noreen Moorhouse, QSM
(b.1930)¹¹⁹

Life Member, 2004

For many of us who have been around for a while, it feels as though this is where we began our struggle for recognition [bicultural ECE] as a valid part of education in Aotearoa... Equality, respect for Māori tradition and Māori movements. It is beautiful and worth having.



Early years



Noreen Moorhouse has faced many challenges. She was born in 1930 at Sister Jones' Nursing home in Takapuna, Auckland at the beginning of the Depression. The oldest of five girls, at the age of two she went to live with her grandparents. Noreen was later enrolled in private kindergarten, which she describes as a dame school¹²⁰ where she recalls walking to school along the beach each day with her grandmother.

My grandmother paid what was quite a large sum of money for me to have to learn to sing, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', to wash my hands in groups, sing nursery rhymes and paint a picture. It was seen as very respectable and proper.

This provided the foundations in education, learning to read and write by the time she turned seven years old, before joining her birth family and attending Albany School, followed by Northcote District High School. Noreen remained at school until she turned 16.

Noreen would describe her primary schooling as harsh. "It was war time, and the teacher was subpoenaed by the government to teach us. She had an MA from Oxford and she ruled with a strap and stick." Noreen recalled seeing the teacher beat six-foot-tall boys. This spurred Noreen's desire to instil values into the children that would later come into her care. Values, she says, that are not transmitted through a stick and strap.

Involvement in early childhood education

In 1948 at the age of 18, and with the blessing of her parents, Noreen got married. She had seven children, the first five in quick succession. "Getting contraception was not easy in those days."

"The 1960s were the hardest times of my life." She lost two children—a son to drowning, and a daughter to leukaemia. Noreen also nursed her husband through illness, who later died. This was a time in her life that Noreen wouldn't wish for anyone else to experience. Noreen needed strength and resilience. Living in Otangarei, a small Māori settlement in Whangārei, Noreen raised her

surviving children. “There was little to no money.” Together with her oldest son, she would gather kai—fish and dandelions—and ate what they could, “on the bones of our bum.” She worked as a cleaner during the day and had to take her youngest child with her to work while the others went to school.

However, it was also in the 1960s that Noreen had got involved in Playcentre. By observing her youngest child with the older children at school, Noreen realised the benefit of other children—a sense of community, or whānau. Before then she felt mothers should be looking after their own babies at home. One day while walking in Otangarei with her young daughter, she saw a derelict building which she was told was a playcentre. Noreen met the supervisor, Mrs Collier (“a lovely woman”), who soon after was offered a full-time job. Consequently, Noreen stepped in to run the Playcentre. She was already enthused through her parent support role.

Noreen would walk the streets of Otangarei picking up all the children in the area—“I caught the bug!” She enrolled in study and gained a National Playcentre Diploma. Playcentre was an important foundation in Noreen’s career. She proudly recalled the later discovery that many of the members of the Executive, when she was first elected, had been involved with Playcentre—“All our children came from Playcentre”.

After nine years in Playcentre Noreen became involved in childcare.

I was probably the biggest redneck in childcare at the beginning because I wasn’t sure children should be in childcare. A political organisation in Whangārei called the National Organisation of Women wanted to start a centre including disadvantaged children as well as children of professional women. It took me a year to make up my mind. In 1975 the Whangārei Childcare Centre opened in a derelict house given by the Council. My family helped plant trees, build climbing frames and a huge sandpit. I was impressed I was going to get 50 dollars a week. That was my salary, but I didn’t always get it. I would get whatever was left at the end of the week. Sometimes it was 25 dollars, sometimes 30 dollars. That’s how we started off.

[illegible]