

Early Education



Volume 66 *Spring / Summer 2020*

- Teacher Led Innovation Round 3
- Teacher Led Innovation Round 4
- Peer learning in ECE
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- Children, families in prison and ECE practice
- Reflexes and support early learning



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Carmen Dalli, Lia deVocht, Andrew Gibbons, Glynne Mackey, Sally Peters, Jenny Ritchie, Sue Stover.

Editors

Prof Claire McLachlan,
The University of Waikato

Dr Karyn Aspden,
Massey University

Design and layout

Margaret Drummond

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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

Contributions can be sent to the 2021editors

Claire McLachlan:
cmclachlan@waikato.ac.nz

Karyn Aspden:
k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz

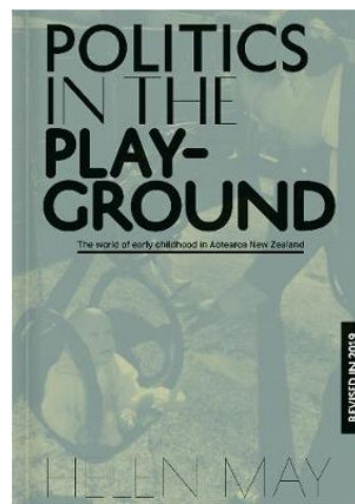
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Politics in the playground

The world of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Reviewer: Sue Stover

May, H. (2019). *Politics in the Playground: The world of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Dunedin, NZ: Otago University Press. ISBN 9781988531816



In 1976 on the banks of the Ilam River on the University of Canterbury campus, I witnessed a staged 'battle' between Alf's Imperial Army and a ragtag group of students. As the mist from the flour bombs was settling, a student journalist interviewed one of the 'generals' while the 'soldiers' dispersed arm and arm to the local pub.

'Who won?' was the key question. 'No matter!' the 'general' shouted, 'the historians will decide!'

This peculiar memory came back to the surface as I read the 3rd edition of Helen May's *Politics in the playground*. In reality I had read 90 percent of it prior to publication because what differentiates this edition published in 2019 from earlier editions, is the addition of one more chapter. This new chapter picks up on predictions made in the 2nd edition anticipating the fragmentation of the early childhood education.

While Helen May is very clear that this new chapter is written from her perspective and that "there are many more stories to be told" (p. 10), those 'who won' their way into this account of the sector's history are principally those that Helen May has paid attention to for the past four or five decades. So there is a certain irony in the ambitious subtitle of the book: 'The world of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand'.

The politics of early childhood 'agendas' (2008–18) feature in this new chapter—and the acting out of those political agendas can be very rough especially for those brave enough to step into the lion's den of attempting to redesign the sector. This is illustrated by the experiences in 2011 of the late Anne B. Smith who maintained a principled and rights-based approach to the sector while enduring what can only be described as bullying because of her writing a minority report that challenged some of the findings/recommendations of the 'ECE Taskforce'. The ripples of that taskforce have continued for more than a decade because of its attempts to diminish the work of Te Kohanga Reo which led to an urgent hearing by, and later support from the Waitangi Tribunal.

For community-focused services, the last decade has seen moves towards corporate governance, and a narrowing of focus on to provision of e.c. service and the marginalising of other agendas such as building parent capacity and wellbeing through participation and involvement in the running of early childhood services. Devastating for the teacher-led services was the 2010 removal of funding for those with fully qualified teaching teams, followed by a decade of stalled bulk funding and on-off progress towards pay parity. Regulations for space, group size and adult:child ratios are widely recognised as desperate for reform—but also stalled in bureaucratic limbo. The new chapter covers these issues.

So this 3rd edition is valuable and speaks volumes about the advocacy work that Helen May and her generation of activist academics have done and continue to do. But it also leaves obscured some of the most difficult aspects of e.c.e. politics—such as might have been illustrated if the first redraft of Te Whariki in 2016 was analysed rather than tantalisingly limited to the statement that it “was *not* reassuring” (p. 324, emphasis in the original). Presumably, confidentiality agreements restrict what can be said, but for those of us reading for insight, this leaves a major gap in understanding the politics of government involvement in the sector and especially its curriculum. Teacher wellbeing is widely recognised as key to quality e.c.e., but difficult to address within market-driven provision. Documentation of this is problematic in part because querying the quality of early childhood education sits uncomfortably with the longstanding feminist support for mothers to have guilt-free choices about decisions they make for themselves that also impact on their very young children.

There is also under-consideration of tensions within the sector—such as the promotion of the teacher-led services, their professionalisation and the impact this continues to have on parent-led services. This division between parent-led and teacher-led is now well entrenched and reflects Wellington-driven policy work two decades ago to create two ‘playing fields’ (where there had previously been an attempt at a ‘level playing field’ for all types of early childhood services)—one for teacher-led and one for parent-led services. This tension is at play within the sector’s internal politics and impacts on the services on the policy margins: Kohanga Reo being one example, but also having considerably more political clout than do others, such as home-based early childhood services and Playcentre.

The politics of provision also are worthy of more consideration, especially where commercial provision clashes with professional status of early childhood teachers. To illustrate: the professional status of registered teachers brings accountability to the Teaching Council. However, it is often the case that centre managers are not registered teachers and are thus not held to the same standards of ethical practice and standards. In day-to-day practice, this is of little importance until managers use the Teaching Council’s complaints process—sometimes vexatiously—to bring proceedings against teachers who can find themselves with limited job

opportunities while the complaints process is worked through. Thus, the complaints system has the potential to be ‘weaponised’ by unscrupulous managers against teaching staff who raise legitimate concerns about policies and practices in an EC centre. The effect can be traumatising on teachers. This is a direct, but unintended consequence, of the professionalising of the EC sector and its commercialisation. These are both the result of national policies. These were, and remain, political decisions.

Finally, there are some user-not-so-friendly aspects of this book. Perhaps there was not sufficient time or resources to re-write? Regardless, some of what was written in 2008, remains in present tense, and detailed statistics in Chapter 10 which were needed to understand the situation in 2008 are increasingly irrelevant in 2020. The effect is somehow diminishing of the contemporary reader who has to keep adjusting what is written from present to past tense. And for those of us who read with one finger in the footnotes section at the back of the book, navigating Helen May’s sources is problematic because there is not an overall reference list. So if a source has already been used earlier, the footnoted information can be incomplete and a hunt back through the footnotes ensues and is often abandoned. The style of referencing here may be how historians write history, but it is not easy to use.

We early childhood people can be proud of our sector’s whakapapa. However, the fragmentation of the sector that Helen May describes also is present in what is covered. The granular history of day-to-day life in sector is probably most visible in the unofficial teacher-focused Facebook pages—which will be a challenge for historians to access. Yet the voice of contemporary teachers needs amplifying as part of our history. So when it comes time to write another mainstream history—instead of a 4th edition of *Politics in the playground*, can I put in a plug for a history that includes more perspectives, a format that is reader-friendly with graphics/photos and easily accessed referencing and is aimed at contemporary readers.

But in the meantime, Kia ora to Otago University Press for continuing to publish for the early childhood market. And Kia pai tō mahi, Helen May, for keeping us aware that we have a history and that we collectively continue to make history. What we do matters.