

**A History of  
Early Childhood Education  
in Canada, Australia,  
and New Zealand**



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Larry Prochner



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*I dedicate this book to the pioneer directors  
of the kindergarten associations  
in Winnipeg, Sydney, and Wellington.*



## Contents

	List of Illustrations / ix
	Acknowledgments / xi
	List of Abbreviations / xii
1	Childhood and Education / 1
2	Infant Schools in Britain / 12
3	Infant Schools in the Case-Study Countries / 42
4	Childcare and Daycare / 86
5	Kindergarten from Germany to England and America / 102
6	Kindergarten in the Case-Study Countries / 132
7	Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association / 172
8	Kindergarten Union of New South Wales / 200
9	Wellington Free Kindergarten Association / 219
10	Conclusion: Change and Continuity / 235
	Notes / 252
	Selected Bibliography / 311
	Index / 317



## Illustrations

### Figures

- 30 / Infant school classroom, 1825
- 33 / Infant school playground, 1825
- 63 / John Neagle, *An Indian Boy: Shahwahnekzhih*, 1829
- 72 / *Interior of New Infants' School*, Waimate, by William Bambridge, 1844
- 108 / Froebel Gift four
- 108 / A winding staircase, Gift four
- 108 / Froebel Gift six
- 140 / A prospective student at St. Michael's residential school, Saskatchewan, 1909
- 145 / Demonstration kindergarten at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, 1876
- 147 / Student teachers at the Toronto Normal School demonstration kindergarten, c. 1898
- 178 / All People's Mission Kindergarten class, Winnipeg, 1904
- 214 / Children at play in a KUNSW kindergarten, Sydney, 1928

- 227 / Children using Montessori materials, Perth, 1920
- 239 / Circle time in a KUNSW kindergarten, Sydney, 1928
- 245 / Children at play, selling fruit at the Beretainia Kindergarten,  
Honolulu, 1928
- 245 / Children at play, doing laundry at the Beretainia Kindergarten,  
Honolulu, 1928
- 250 / Student teachers at the Wellington FKA, c. 1930

## **Tables**

- 1 Kindergarten courses at Western State Normal School, 1909 / 185
- 2 Kindergarten courses at Oberlin Kindergarten Training School,  
1924-25 / 193
- 3 Student schedule, Wellington FKA, 1920 / 223
- 4 Student duties, Wellington FKA, 1926 / 224
- 5 KUWA Training College program of study, 1915-16 / 227

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## Abbreviations

CMS	Anglican Church Missionary Society
CPR	Canadian Pacific Railway
CWM	Church World Mission
FKCAA	Free Kindergarten and Children's Aid Association of the Hawaiian Islands
GGKA	Golden Gate Kindergarten Association
IKU	International Kindergarten Union
JSFKA	Jackson Street Free Kindergarten Association
KSAW	Kindergarten Settlement Association of Winnipeg
KUNSW	Kindergarten Union of New South Wales
KUSA	Kindergarten Union of South Australia
KUWA	Kindergarten Union of Western Australia
LMS	London Missionary Society
NSW	New South Wales
NZC	New Zealand Company
OEA	Ontario Educational Association
OKTS	Oberlin Kindergarten Training School
SFI	Sydney Foundling Institution
SKTC	Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College
Wellington FKA	Wellington Free Kindergarten Association
Winnipeg FKA	Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association

## chapter 1

## Childhood and Education

ON JUNE 6, 1825, the Infant School Society held its second annual meeting at the Freemasons' Tavern in London. The meeting was filled with long-winded speeches, leading the exasperated journalist for the *Times* to write of speaker the Reverend Edward Irving, "Owing to the impossibility of extracting any meaning from many parts of the metaphysical poetical prose with which the rev. orator's address abounded, we were unable to follow him, except so far as he detailed the progress of an infant school established under his eye in Billingsgate, by two sisters, who confined themselves to certain limits, and whose efforts were crowned with complete success."<sup>1</sup> Other contributions were more to the point, and some even inspired applause. They described the schools as having both "negative" and "positive" benefits: preventing crime and increasing human potential. They claimed that reaching children early on was a matter of some urgency: though mouldable at birth, their abilities, temperament, and morals were fixed soon after. Although family-based care was preferred, it was believed that the parental care of poor families "at best was only negligence."<sup>2</sup> Most poor children, the *Times* journalist reported, "did not receive the slightest particle of education."<sup>3</sup> It was argued that the poor children targeted by infant schools were not actually taken from families, but from the streets, "corrupted neighbourhoods," or inept child minders to whom they were sent while their parents were at work.<sup>4</sup> The children saved from this situation, being too young for parents to send them out to work, would barely be missed. In place of parental care, infant schools offered poor youngsters

a sound moral education using teaching methods that acknowledged their propensity to learn by playing, a remarkable innovation at the time. Henry Brougham, social reformer and parliamentarian, described the infant school system as marked by the “total absence of all restraint upon the children” and estimated that 90 percent of instruction came through amusements.<sup>5</sup> However, to understand Brougham’s view of play, it is best to leave behind our own.

The twentieth-century notion of “free play,” with its emphasis on individuals making free choices among available activities, is different from the infant school idea of learning by amusements. Amusements in this case were generally singing, marching, or movement exercises performed by groups of up to three hundred children. The “five objects” of the infant school designated by the teacher and vicar William Wilson were order, attention, obedience, instruction, and amusement. He explained that “amusement is mentioned last ... not because it is of the least importance, but because it is intimately interwoven in all other parts of the system, which is eminently a system of *instruction by amusement*.”<sup>6</sup> Even outdoor play was quite controlled. Play materials were found to cause injuries or arguments and were gradually withdrawn. For older children, learning was also meant to be an effortful process — a lesson in persistence in the face of difficulties — and play did not fit this idea. Educationists did not immediately shift their thinking in consideration of the young age of their pupils.

In 1825, infant schools were a modest experiment, with a scattering of schools established in Britain. By 1835, there were several hundred.<sup>7</sup> In the same period, missionary societies established infant schools for Ojibway children in Upper Canada, Maori in New Zealand, and for poor European children in urban centres from Quebec City to Sydney to Wellington. The schools were an important component of mission work with indigenous children, though most had closed by the 1850s. Infant schools for European children continued as an infants’ class in public schools. This book documents the history of infant schools and the later development of kindergartens as they moved from their European origins to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where they were shaped by colonial politics and policies and by shifting social, educational, and scientific ideas.

One motivation in writing this book about the past is to gain a better understanding of the important place given to early childhood education in the present. As a strategy for long-term economic social development, most nations around the globe list early childhood services providing

childcare, health, and educational benefits for young children as a top priority.<sup>8</sup> Governments and non-governmental organizations have produced report after report on the benefits of investing in children's health and education, as well as policies directing the delivery of services. These policies have only sometimes been translated into meaningful programs.

Cross-national research on early childhood services focusing on the current scene has added to our understanding of developments in a number of national systems, particularly in the area of policy.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, there are gaps in the overall approach to cross-national research, as identified by Peter Moss in his review of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care. Moss stresses the need to engage a wider range of perspectives to avoid viewing children and services for children through a single lens: "We need to be aware that the cross-national researcher is partial and is involved in a meaning making process, using his or her favoured collection of theories and perspectives. We also need to consider what disciplinary perspectives are *not* being brought to the work and what the consequences might be."<sup>10</sup>

One approach to comparative education is to consider schooling within a given nation as a variation on a theme, subject to changes directed by local policy, priorities, and other circumstances. I began my research believing that early childhood education, which, for the most part, developed outside state-sanctioned schooling systems, would be more nuanced and would have greater space for variation than that offered by the state system. What I found was that early education models such as the infant school and the kindergarten were reproduced quite faithfully in the corners of the globe, with classrooms having a similar look across diverse settings. There was also remarkable congruence in the meanings attached to the programs and to poor children and their families. What distinguished the colonial experience was the application of ideas to new populations of children: those of slaves, of British and European settlers, of indigenous parents, and of mixed unions. Examining early education in these contexts sheds light not only on colonial schooling, but also on the pedagogies in their original forms. Writing about the Belgian experience in the Congo, Marc Depaepe observes, "Because Western civilizing took place in the colonies under pressure, the study of the colonial educational past, even more than that of Western history in general, reveals the systemic faults and pedagogical paradoxes of the 'modern' educational project."<sup>11</sup>

The nature of early childhood education was greatly shaped by the contribution of individuals such as Robert Owen and Friedrich Froebel, along with their philosophies and the appurtenances of their programs. The standard genealogy of the kindergarten, for example, charts links among individuals leading outward from Froebel, credited as the father of kindergarten, rather than looking to other sources of influence.<sup>12</sup> As an attempt at critical history, this book charts the polygenesis of ideas contributing to early childhood education.<sup>13</sup>

An example of the way in which ideas concerning preschool education crossed boundaries was the interchange between England and France in the nineteenth century. In 1802, visitors from England, including Richard Edgeworth and his daughter Mary Edgeworth, toured the infant daycare centres in Paris established by Adelaide de Pastoret.<sup>14</sup> Their observations were shared with educationists in the United Kingdom, influencing the ideas of the Welsh industrialist and social reformer Robert Owen. In 1816, Owen established what is considered to be the first infant school, at his mills at New Lanark, Scotland, for the children of his employees. The meeting of the Infant School Society in London recounted at the start of this chapter was inspired by his effort. In 1827, Eugénie Millet visited England on behalf of a committee set up in Paris, to learn about the infant school system. Although none of the committee understood English, they were nevertheless impressed with the spirit of the schools. Upon her return, Millet worked with Jean Denys Cochin to establish the first *salle d'asile* (refuge) in Paris. A few years later, a book attributed to teacher James Buchanan was brought from London to serve as a guide.<sup>15</sup>

## Savage

Ideas crossed from other disciplines as well as other nations. A prevalent view of child development in the nineteenth century was that,<sup>16</sup> by virtue of their place in the life course, children were savage by nature. A theory of racial recapitulation was prominent in psychology when kindergarten ideas gained entry into public schools and the educational childcare services called free kindergartens. It was also a core idea in Froebel's concept of child development and was contained in Maria Montessori's vision. In an address to members of the International Kindergarten Union in 1915, Montessori explained, "All forms of imperfect development which we find in the child, bear some resemblance to like characteristics in the

savage.” At Clark University in the United States, psychologist G. Stanley Hall set out to discover the true nature of childhood by studying children in situ. Though children were everywhere, the content of their minds was unknown to scientists. The development of the mind, however, was believed to occur in a particular fashion in line with cultural epoch theory. As explained by Perry Le Fevre, “For Hall, it became one of the organizing images of his system of thought, both for understanding human development and for educational psychology.”<sup>17</sup>

In the popular Herbartian theory to which many kindergarten theorists subscribed, child development repeated the cultural evolution of the human race, and the school curriculum should take this into account. This was only the natural outcome of Froebel’s call to study children and their interests, explains Le Fevre. What was seen via observation was filtered through the lens of evolutionary theory, which was at the forefront of scientific thinking in education and psychology. Kindergarten was the appropriate beginning of formal education, and children should be taught about savage peoples through a naturalistic curriculum including gardening and animal husbandry, reduced in the school to working a small plot or to the care and feeding of a class rabbit or goldfish. Beading and weaving, handicrafts taught as part of manual education, were traced to their primitive origins. This was described in Mary Ledyard and Bertha Breckenfeld’s 1912 *Guide to Primary Manual Work*, in their lessons titled “Primitive Indian Life.” Children were “shown the value of beads to the Child-Race” — indigenous peoples — “and the child of today finds equal delight in them.”<sup>18</sup>

It was believed that, due to their age and genetic origins, adult Europeans had reached the apex of civilization and that a teacher brought her “race experience” to the kindergarten classroom. According to Grace Fulmer, a prominent trainer of kindergarten teachers in New York and Los Angeles, “‘Race experience’ we have seen represented in the teacher — in her knowledge, skill, appreciation, and wisdom, and in her standards of value, which are an inheritance of the ages used by her to lift the acts of her children to ever-higher levels of consciousness and give them ever-increasing power.”<sup>19</sup>

Florence Thompson, while a student at the Ottawa Normal School in 1910, faithfully recorded course lectures on how, “in the development of the individual man, the history of the spiritual development of the human race is repeated and the race in its totality may be viewed as one human

being, in whom there will be found the necessary steps in the development of the individual man.”<sup>20</sup> Her notes detailed the necessary steps before going on to outline some applications of the ideas for instruction in music and crafts:

Develop from savage state (gratification of physical appetites and passions) — leave wandering lifestyle to settle, learn ethical conduct. When rightly understood, each child is seen to pass through these stages of development.

The young infant, loving and cared for as he is, is a savage crying when he is physically uncomfortable, peaceful and happy when his creative wants are satisfied. Learns to recognize people and respond to mother with smile — begins tribal life.

Nomadic period, wandering and exploring. Increasing sense of possession — need to develop idea of ethical rights and sense of justice.

The music of barbarous and semi-barbarous nations is crude, and we find that the child is attracted to rhythm before he shows a liking for melody. A love of harmony comes at a later stage.

Again, the delight of the savage in ornamentations shows the childishness of his pleasures, and a child’s delight in a string of beads and the wearing of [illegible] glittering ornaments, shows the savage state of his development.<sup>21</sup>

Young children took baby steps to maturity, a civilized state. On the frontier, far from the influence of European culture, it was necessary to re-create civilization, and infant schools and kindergartens in the colonies had a special role in teaching respect for teachers, punctuality, and work skills. In some cases, they also separated settler children from indigenous children or slave children. In Southwest Africa (Namibia), under the German colonial administration during the years prior to the First World War, kindergartens functioned to remove settler children from the influence of their African caregivers. Kindergartens were reserved for the children of German colonists and, in some instances, for “coloured” children until they were barred in about 1905.<sup>22</sup> The Woman’s League of the German Colonial Society believed that kindergartens would provide employment for “surplus” German women and would help settlers by “removing their children from the ‘danger’ that African nannies and servants supposedly posed.”<sup>23</sup>

## Civilized

Evolutionary theory had a long-lived influence on kindergarten ideas via educational psychology and the popularity of habit training in the 1920s. Educational play civilized children by developing their internal controls. If this was to occur, historian Marc Depaepe observes, children “had to play and be happy on the pedagogical island that adults had reserved for them.”<sup>24</sup> Infant schools and kindergartens separated out the youngest children, treating them to unique and sometimes odd-sounding methods with far-reaching aims. For Montessori, a long-term goal of early education was the “perfection of the human race,” which would be accomplished via one child at a time and through children to their parents.<sup>25</sup>

Early education also had the more prosaic purpose of child socialization. Colonial administrators, the social elite, educationists, and in some cases, parents, were uneasy about children growing up on the frontier. The pull of nature on an immature child might prove too strong. Some nature experience was desired for urban children and made available by organizations such as Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and summer camps, but this was contained, controlled, and under the supervision of adults. Peter Pierce describes the theme of the “lost child” in Australian literature and folklore as an expression of a fear of the bush as well as a metaphor for isolation from the home country.<sup>26</sup> Children could be lost in the bush and to the bush. Regardless, it held an attraction for them that they were unprepared or unable to resist.

Infant schools and kindergartens were mainly urban institutions offering protection from moral dangers lurking in the urban “jungle” — unsupervised play on the street. Kindergarten was eventually seen as a good fit for colonial children, part of an evolutionary approach to schooling with kindergarten at the base. Kindergarten was a sanctuary from academic work, permitting freedom of growth within careful limits — a commonwealth of childhood governed by adults. Literacy distinguished children from adults and the savage from the civilized.<sup>27</sup> Whereas, in the infant school, reading was a key part of the curriculum, kindergarten children were protected from books and the pressure of the mental activity brought on by reading. The move from children’s supposed union with nature to dominion over children’s nature was a significant conceptual shift.<sup>28</sup> Had it not occurred, the kindergarten could not have endured as long as it did or have assumed a place in systems of mass education. Other metaphysical

approaches to early education, such as the Waldorf Schools, have continued as alternative approaches to schooling.<sup>29</sup>

The pedagogical island described by Depaepe was an important site for assimilation and citizenship education. Reporting on her US kindergarten for Indian children in the 1890s, teacher Lucie Calista Maley highlighted, “One important thing we teach is patriotism. They never knew before that they had any share in the flag, but now they say proudly, ‘it is our flag.’”<sup>30</sup> At Florence Thompson’s kindergarten in Ottawa, children constructed models of the Parliament buildings using educational blocks called Gift number five, which had been devised by Froebel. Presumably, this activity was intended to provide a local flavour to the kindergarten work, as much as to raise awareness of Canadian government.

In Australia at the end of the nineteenth century, the social and intellectual elite were concerned that the country’s convict history had resulted in lasting damage to family and human development. The growth of the middle class following an economic upturn in the 1880s made the poor and their children more visible.<sup>31</sup> The allegiance of the poor to king and colony was reinforced through their children’s kindergarten education. A British visitor to a Sydney kindergarten about 1909 described a typical flag ceremony: “The children went through the ceremony of saluting the Union Jack. One child held the flag, and we all sang ‘God save the King.’ Then they gave three cheers for the flag, and touched their heads and their hearts, and held out their hands as a sign of service to it, and we all saluted it.”<sup>32</sup>

In daily flag ceremonies and on special occasions such as Empire Day, the bond between Britain and the former colonies and among the colonies themselves was reinforced. Relationships between settlers and indigenous people were also clearly established. This occurred at teachers’ colleges as well as in children’s programs. At the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College, student teachers celebrated Empire Day with a “pageant representing the different possessions of the British Empire”: “Each of the eight free Kindergartens represent one, by dressing in the characteristic costume of each country, and by the gifts it lays at Britannia’s feet. Most picturesque was Canada portraying the incident of Wolf’s mission to the Red Indians, the girls being disguised as a Red Indian squaw and brave, and the red-coated military men of the period. Africa was represented by miners, and an excellently got-up kaffir man and woman, and Australia by shearers, miners, and an aboriginal man and woman.”<sup>33</sup> The qualities of England and some its possessions were set out:

England — rose laden and womanly  
 Scotland — kilted and strong  
 Ireland — whimsical, petulant but wholly dear  
 India — with her subtle, Oriental witchery  
 Africa — with a rushing, whirlwind of patriotic fervour  
 Mäoriland — with “supple wrist” beating a rhythm of loyalty  
 Australia — happy, human Australia.<sup>34</sup>

## Bent

“As the twig is bent” was painted on a sign above the entrance to the Woolloomooloo kindergarten in Sydney, Australia, during the 1890s. The kindergarten administrators had ambitious aims for the children who attended. The proverb reflected their belief that children’s development was malleable only to a point, after which the impression set.<sup>35</sup> Thus, their program offered more than a safe place or a play space for children — it was to be a conversion experience for poor youngsters, permanently altering their development. The fact that the activities themselves were banal and seemingly unconnected with child life was not a great contradiction for kindergarteners. Historian Barbara Beatty notes that kindergarteners were relentlessly optimistic and future oriented, unmindful of possible limitations of the system and defensive regarding its peculiarities.<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Hewes describes their thinking as a kind of “phantasy when they visualized families reformed and communities restructured through the music and games of their young children.”<sup>37</sup> Part of the story told in this book is how the fantasy was constructed. There were, however, skeptics, including Henriette Schrader-Breyman, who was a student at Froebel’s school in the village of Keilhau in Germany. From Keilhau she wrote to her parents, “I must confess, I could not believe that these interminable games could really be the chief expression of Froebel’s idea. Yes, I must say, there was much that struck me as laughable, it seems so narrow, so limiting, so small, that so much playing to order should ennoble mankind!”<sup>38</sup>

## Mission

In kindergarten, as well as in infant schools, children were believed to gain negative and positive benefits. A rallying call for supporters of charity kindergartens was that they were the “surest preventatives to lives of crime.”<sup>39</sup>

Leaders in the child welfare movement chimed in. To his calls for children's refuges, industrial homes, and other institutions, John Joseph Kelso, founder of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, added "kindergarten mission schools, established in different parts of the city, to take care of young children before they become hardened juvenile criminals."<sup>40</sup>

This dual orientation of social welfare and education was reflected in what can be distinguished as the missionary and the academic traditions of schools for young children. In the missionary tradition, religious groups sought to civilize and convert indigenous children, as well as to rescue European children living in urban slums. The aims of civilization and Christianization were intertwined in what Thomas Popkewitz and Marianne Bloch call the "salvation narrative."<sup>41</sup> The salvation narrative connected the child, the parents, and the school: the school was the site of redemption, the child the object of redemption, and the parents a secondary object rescued indirectly through the child. Infant schools and the private charity kindergartens called "free" kindergartens were founded in this missionary tradition. Many free kindergartens were part of initiatives called settlement houses, which aimed to bring middle-class standards of sanitation and cultural and social life to poor children and their families. Martha Vicinus describes settlement work as an outgrowth of mission work in the empire: "The settlers in the slums would colonize the 'natives,' teaching them not only cleanliness, but also new standards of speech, deportment, and manners."<sup>42</sup>

The aim was clearly assimilation, and some educational leaders were overwhelmed by the task, recognizing the limits of a part-time and short-term kindergarten education. At the Memorial Kindergarten in Hawaii, where Japanese children made up the majority of enrolment by the 1920s, Katherine Murdoch from Columbia University lamented the continued influence of parents, whom she called a "foreign influence": "Although these children had had the inestimable advantage of two years of kindergarten, the twelve hundred hours in this happy environment inevitably had not been able entirely to counterbalance the one-hundred-and-sixty-three hundred hours of foreign influence exerted during these same two years, much less entirely to supplant the effect of all the hours of their previous four or five years of life."<sup>43</sup> Whatever the actual impact on the children, it was believed that preschool programs would eventually encourage parents to participate in settlement house programs or other activities. Kindergartens were a gateway program to the larger target community.<sup>44</sup> The same

principle applied to mission work among indigenous peoples, where infant schools attracted entire families to the mission community. If this did not occur, the mostly mission-run infant schools and kindergartens could at least attempt to alienate children from their families, or in some cases forcibly remove them.