

Learning from a pioneer in the field of Politics of Early Childhood Education and Care. Introduction of KINDknow Invited International Scholar- Professor Emeritus Helen May



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We were honoured to have Professor Emeritus Helen May coming all the way from New Zealand (NZ) to visit us at the KINDknow Centre in the last week of August 2019. Helen May is a member of our Scientific Board. While she was here, she participated in our scientific board meeting and gave guest lectures of her research for both PhDs and our senior researchers. In addition, she gave valuable feedback and advice during our yearly research seminar for key researchers and PhD candidates. Below is a brief introduction of Helen May.

Helen May is well known for speaking and publishing extensively, both nationally and internationally in the field of early childhood curriculum and the history and policy of early years education. In the early 90's Helen May and Margaret Carr worked on the development of Te Whāriki, the first national curriculum guidelines for New Zealand. In 1995 Helen May was appointed to the first New Zealand professorial Chair in Early Childhood Education at Victoria University Wellington.

So, what can we learn from Professor Emeritus Helen May? What made her interested in early childhood education (ECE) and what does she think about the challenges of today? In this interview the professor has elaborated on these topics.

What is your background and what made you interested in early childhood education?

I was trained as primary school teacher in the mid-1960s and for 9 years taught mainly 5-6-year olds both in NZ and England. Children start school at 5 in NZ but in England they arrive as four-year olds which is very young. So, I have always worked in early years education. My shift into what we termed preschool or early childhood education happened in the mid-1970s when I had my two older children and I decided to return to university to complete a degree and do postgraduate work. There was a university creche for student mothers. I soon began part time work at the creche and later became the supervisor. This became my introduction to the politics of childcare - at the time childcare received no government funding, unlike kindergartens that were fully funded. I was part of various campaigns to get funding support for childcare and was involved in establishing an industrial union for early childhood workers. In the 1980s childcare services shifted into the education department and the slow move towards equitable funding. Integrated kindergarten and childcare teacher education were also established. In 1983 I wrote my master thesis on the 'Politics of Childcare'. My whole career has been one of advocacy for ECE - at times working with government but critique and protest have also been important and so has documenting the political story. It is why I first started to research the history of ECE.



Photo: Helen May as junior schoolteacher in New Zealand 1967

What is the funniest thing you have done in your career?

I don't know if this is the funniest thing and certainly the College Principal and authorities did not regard it as funny at all - But my students and our staff had FUN. But we were in TROUBLE! I was appointed as a Kindergarten Lecturer at Hamilton Teachers College in 1987. It was all rather staid. To liven things up I mounted a junk day in the College foyer with loads of junk which our new students and children from the creche could build, create, paint and play with over the course of a day. Of course, I did not ask permission to use this space -we just took it over. The activity was banned in the future so the next year we used outdoor railings as a massive weaving - that too was banned and so the next year we painted the paths and walls around the College. In 1990 the College merged with the neighbouring University of Waikato and it all became serious again!! These were fun times and funny, but it was also about being political for ECE in a College focused mainly on primary and secondary teacher education.

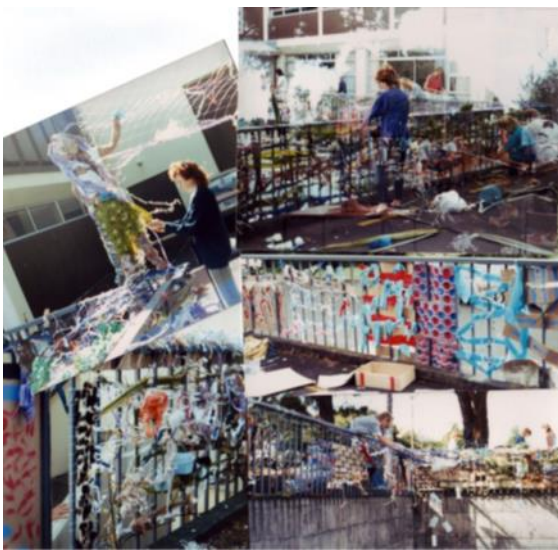


Photo: «junk day» in Hamilton Teachers College in 1988

Which topics have you personally found the most interesting to work with?



Photo: Helen May making her political point in 1983

«We want our students to be politically active and be advocates for children. History and politics are entwined - we need to understand our past in order to craft pathways to the future»

I have always taught in the field of the history and politics of ECE and Education. We want our students to be politically active and be advocates for children. History and politics are entwined - we need to understand our past in order to craft pathways to the future. The degree programs I have been involved in developing have always had a strong political component alongside the pedagogy and personal development. Because all three of my children attended childcare as infants and I was the supervisor of a creche that ran an infant program I have put a lot of time into the development of courses for students around the 'under threes'. My background in childcare and my work with babies and toddlers was the main contribution I brought to our development of the NZ ECE curriculum known as Te Whāriki - translated as a Maori 'mat for all to stand on' with many possible patterns in its weaving. This was work for the government undertaken with Margaret Carr in the 1990s. While it was about curriculum - it was also very political as a national curriculum is a political document. We wanted to think about curriculum differently.

What do you think are the current most important issues regarding early childhood education?

In New Zealand ECE still does not have equal status with the rest of the education sectors despite political rhetoric that it is important and there have been many gains over the decades of my career. However, recently kindergarten teachers have won a major salary settlement of pay parity with primary and secondary teachers. They once had this, but it had been eroded. We still need pay parity for teachers working in childcare settings. We are also still trying to get 100% qualified teachers working in the ECE sector. Again, government promises and pathways towards this have been eroded. Internationally the percentage is high with around 70% of all staff working in ECE holding a teaching degree qualification.



Photo: 1971 class picnic in England



Photo: Helen May Writing her thesis - The Politics of Childcare in 1982



Photo: Helen May making her inaugural speech as First NZ Professor in ECE 1995

