
The interview

Geraldine McDonald

Sarah Boyd

This is one of a series about researchers whose work has made a difference in the area of early years education. Sarah Boyd interviews Geraldine McDonald.

When Geraldine McDonald started her research career, there was virtually no serious focus on the early childhood years. She has been one of the influential thinkers and powerful advocates who have helped ensure a huge shift in attitudes and attention to the sector over the past 50 years.

Geraldine was a born researcher and, at 86, it is still what she does. “I’ve always felt it was the most interesting thing. I’ll wake up in the morning and I have a solution to something I’ve been thinking about.”

In some ways her path to early childhood education was a conventional one: she had a child and became involved in Playcentre. Then, after living abroad for 3 years, she worked briefly in the Kindergarten Teachers College and returned to university to do a master’s. She had had some experience with Playcentre and decided she wanted to research whether a playcentre created a community:

I tried it out on my professor and he said you can’t do that, nobody can define community. Why don’t you do something on reading? Well I took no notice, I went ahead and did it.

The exchange is characteristic of the drive, steely resolve and ready wit that has served her well. The young Geraldine had to be determined from the start, just to ensure she got the education she wanted. The cost-cutting Depression-years government had bumped back the school starting age and her parents moved house, further delaying her start until

she was nearly seven. She quickly caught up and finished secondary school with university entrance. Then there were more hurdles. Her father had died and “mother felt she couldn’t afford to support me at university and I couldn’t get into teachers’ college because I was too young.”

So she headed to one of the only places that would have her, a Homecraft teachers course at the Dunedin Teachers College. Even then she was told she was too young and worried she would be sent home. She persevered, graduated and ended up teaching clothing at Hutt Valley Memorial Technical College. She taught for about 5 years, including a year in England, although later in life she returned to university as a lecturer at the School of Education at Victoria University.

Her first real foray into research was the study of a playcentre and its community for her master’s. She chose to work with playcentres in Wainuiomata and relished the opportunity to meet Māori women on a casual basis, developing a lifelong interest in things Māori. The study looked at the friendship and support networks women brought with them to playcentre and whether their involvement helped build up those networks.

Late in the 1970s Geraldine saw an advertisement for the J. R. McKenzie fellowship for educational research and decided to make a pitch for a larger study along similar lines to her master’s. She wanted to look at different types of early childhood centres and how they functioned in

relation to their communities. She was also aware that independent groups had great difficulty with funding and felt the research report might give them a voice.

The fellowship enabled her to travel quite widely to interview women, including Matakana Island and Taranaki, and she received a great deal of help from Māori welfare officers.

I tottered off into those Māori communities with a questionnaire—real Pākehā stuff.

She looked at different communities: those where groups of kin lived together, those still living close together but in areas that had been engulfed by urban growth and cities where Māori were living away from their tribal area. The composition and cohesiveness of the Māori community turned out to be important because it determined whether the women in the preschool groups had control over them. Add more Pākehā, and the dynamic changed.

The Pākehā women would take charge and boss the Māori women and the Māori women wouldn't have that.

The work was published as a book *Māori Mothers and Pre-school Education* in 1973. On the strength of that work she was appointed to head a newly established Early Childhood Unit at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Early on someone gave the unit a wooden safety pin to serve as its symbol. After all, early childhood was basically about nappies wasn't it? It was a joke, she says and, you get the impression, the sort that was commonly made.

She was determined the new unit would extend its gaze beyond kindergartens which, along with playcentres, were the main early childhood education centres available at that time. She is particularly proud of an early study by Rae Julian, a J. R. McKenzie fellow and later a Human Rights Commissioner. There was at the time considerable disapproval of backyard

minding. Rae wandered around an area looking for signs of children at play and then talked to whoever was looking after them. Her report removed the disapproval from opinions about looking after children and treated it as a human response to a need.

Geraldine has always been more interested in the connections across early childhood education services than the differences. This was not always a comfortable position to hold, especially in the 1960s and 70s when there was a great divide between playcentre and kindergarten. But arguments over whether children needed to sit on the mat at the end of the session (the kindergarten way) or remain in free play (playcentre) were not for her.

In her view and experience, the philosophies of the movements were similar and for parents; it was often happenstance whether their children ended up in playcentre or kindergarten. She wrote an article called *Grasping the Nettle* which emphasised the similarities between the two.

Of course the early childhood landscape is far more populated now. She points to the development of Te Kōhanga Reo and Iritana Tawhiwhirangi's idea that it was a community development programme rather than an early childhood development programme.

That makes a lot of sense to me and it tended to resonate with my view of what was going on in the early childhood centres, that they were developments for women as well as children. I didn't think it really mattered whether it was Playcentre or kindergarten, although Playcentre offered women more opportunities.

The importance of a unified sector saw her in a bureaucratic scrap in the 1970s, when the childcare sector was moved out of the auspices of the then Department of Education and put under the Social Welfare umbrella, while kindergartens and playcentres remained within education. Under this move, childcare centres

being newly set up in universities for staff, or crèches set up for shoppers to use, were classified as welfare, which was clearly incorrect. She ended up on the State Services Commission Working Group on Early Childhood Care and Education, which had to determine these questions and yet included people who had no idea about the issues.

One day someone on the group said something about those shoppers' crèches not being any good and the chair said, "I used a shoppers' crèche just the other day so that I could have a game of golf and it was fine."

After that she felt more confident of a positive outcome, though it was often a hugely frustrating experience. She has served on many committees and advisory groups in her time, experiencing that same degree of frustration and determination to bring about change. She was part of the Committee on Women during the 1975 International Women's Year and she has been motivated all her life to make sure the concerns of women are heard.

Much of the research work she is known for was carried out at NZCER, where she gradually moved from a focus on early years to schooling. She researched and published on a huge range of issues. The formidable list of publications and projects from her time at NZCER includes the Māori Family Education report, a national study of parents helping at Playcentre, the *Joining In* series on special needs children in mainstream schooling, the Junior school study and work on class size, girls in education, and literacy development. She served as NZCER's Assistant Director from 1977 until her retirement in 1992.

Not that retirement is quite the word. From her sunny, book-lined apartment in central Wellington, she has simply continuing researching and writing and sparking with ideas.