



Who Doesn't Get to Pre-School in Newtown?

By Penny Jamieson

Newtown is an inner city suburb of Wellington. It is one of the oldest areas of the city and it is now, in contrast with its past, one of the poorest. People living there tend to be those whose jobs place them at the lower end of the socio-economic status scale.¹ In recent years it has become one of the areas in Wellington in which migrants from many different countries have made their homes. Twenty-three different languages were identified during the survey reported in this article.

Children from such areas are less likely to attend a pre-school than are children from middle class areas. Whether this is because places are not available or because parents are unwilling to send their children is not always clear. But there has been a concern to increase the number of places available and so increase the number of children attending. The British Educational Priorities Area programme was designed to correct the distribution of pre-school services to enable facilities to be provided for children from poorer areas. In the United States, the Headstart programme had similar aims.

In New Zealand we need to look carefully at the distribution of pre-school services. There have been two major contributions to our understanding of the problems. In 1970 an overall survey of the pre-school educational scene appeared in the *Report* of the Committee of Inquiry into Pre-school Education set up

in 1970 by the Minister of Education.² In 1975, David Barney contributed a much more detailed analysis of the situation in his study entitled *Who Gets to Pre-School*.³

Barney found that in New Zealand the distribution of pre-school facilities is reasonably uniform. Both low socio-economic status areas and high socio-economic status areas have about the same number of places available. However, he also found that fewer children from low socio-economic status families get to the available institutions. Waiting lists are generally much shorter in low socio-economic areas, indicating, Barney concluded, that non-attendance is primarily because parents choose not to enrol their children. Why should this be so? Barney's explanation is that parents in low socio-economic status suburbs are either not interested in having their children attend pre-school, or that they are put off by the complicated waiting-list procedures that many institutions run.

Other researchers have identified other factors. In a study of Newlands, a high socio-economic status suburb of Wellington, Anne Meade found that parents who had recently moved into the area were less likely to have obtained pre-school places for their children than were parents who had lived there for several years.⁴ Howard and others studying a state housing area found the same. They also reported that parents living in the state housing area often wrongly assumed that there were long waiting lists so they had made no approach to their local pre-schools.⁵ These are all factors that could well apply to Newtown, being, as it is, a low socio-economic status area. However it is also a multi-ethnic area, and an area in which many different languages are spoken. In Australia, de Lemos and Larsen have found that proportionally a lot more children from English speaking backgrounds attended pre-schools than children from non-English speaking backgrounds.⁶ Studies tell us nothing about the children who stay away from pre-schools in such areas. Who are they? And why don't they go? The research reported here goes some way to answering these questions.

The Research Programme

The research was carried out in 1976 in conjunction with members of the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Victoria University, and was part of a larger study of child-care arrangements for the pre-school population of Newtown. A saturation survey of the Newtown school area was organised by the school committee. All the 3- and 4-year-old pre-school children were identified, and the mother or surrogate mother of each was interviewed in their home. There were 165 children. All the interviewing was carried out in a ten-day period at the end of June and the beginning of July 1976. Interpreters (Greek and Samoan) were used where necessary and interviewing proceeded without any major hitch. Perhaps our greatest problem was the weather.

For our research we grouped the mothers ethnically, as follows:

Pakehas (New Zealand born Europeans; Australians, Canadians, British...)

Maoris

Pacific Islanders (Samoans, Cook Islanders, Tongans and Niueans)

Greeks and Asians (South Europeans, Asians, and any non-Pacific Islanders)

Pre-schools in Newtown

There were in Newtown, at the time this survey was taken, two free kindergartens, one playcentre, two small community playgroups and three day-care centres. One of the kindergartens had two rolls of 40 each and the other had two rolls of 25. The teachers of both kindergartens were well aware of the difficulties in recruiting in a multi-ethnic area and were struggling to overcome these difficulties. The playcentre was at the time, struggling hard in inadequate premises. It in fact closed down a few weeks later, although it has since re-opened. One of the playgroups was run by the Plunket Society on one morning a week only, and one was held in a church hall on Mount Victoria about half a mile outside the area and operated for two mornings each week. Both were primarily intended as places

where mothers could meet and relax while their children experienced something of play with a group of children larger than that encountered at home and in their neighbourhood. These were primarily social in aim for both mothers and children.

The kindergarten accounted for most of the places that were available. Thirty-seven percent of the 3- and 4-year-olds attended one or other of the two kindergartens, the day-care centres catered for only 11% and the community pre-school groups catered for only 7%. Over half, 54% of the children, went to no pre-school group.

Who Doesn't Go?

42% of the Pakeha 3- and 4-year-olds

65% of the Maori 3- and 4-year-olds

70% of the Pacific Island 3- and 4-year-olds

48% of the Greek and Asian 3- and 4-year-olds

So the Pakehas use pre-school services the most, closely followed by Greeks and Asians. Maoris and Pacific Islanders use the pre-school services least. Only 30% of Pacific Islands children in Newtown get to pre-school.

Why Don't They Go There?

We looked at factors that might be linked to why parents do not send their children: (1) socio-economic status; (2) the pressure of younger brothers and sisters in the family; (3) the number of years spent in Newtown; (4) the degree of isolation of the mother. We were particularly interested in whether any of these factors could help explain why there was such a variation in attendance between the different ethnic groups. Asking for reasons came later.

Socio-economic Status

In socio-economic status, Newtown is a relatively homogenous neighbourhood; around 77% of the fathers work in manual or semi-skilled jobs. So this factor was not expected to differentiate the pre-school attenders from the non-attenders. But at both the

3-year-old and the 4-year-old age group, the children with fathers in the higher socio-economic groups⁷ were more likely to attend pre-school than were children with fathers in the lower socio-economic groups⁸. Eighty-five percent of those who did not go to a pre-school were from homes of low socio-economic status. Furthermore, when the attendance of children from the various ethnic groups was related to their socio-economic status, we found that:

45% of the Pakeha children with low SES fathers were non-attenders

60% of the Maori children with low SES fathers were non-attenders

89% of the Pacific Island children with low SES fathers were non-attenders

50% of the Greek and Asian children with low SES fathers were non-attenders.

So there were nearly twice as many Pacific Island children than Pakeha children of low socio-economic parents who were non-attenders.

When considering these results, it must be remembered that more Pacific Islanders than Pakeha children had fathers of low socio-economic status. These factors do not, therefore, suggest that low socio-economic status Pacific Islanders are a particular group who miss out on kindergarten, but rather, that low socio-economic Pakehas find access comparatively easy. Low class status is clearly less of a handicap for Pakehas than it is for Pacific Islanders.

Younger Children

One of the particular difficulties that mothers may face when taking their children to pre-school is the necessity for coping with younger children. It is perhaps not easy for a mother to commit herself to taking her babies and toddlers out regularly, whatever the weather, to accompany an older child to pre-school. But we found that in Newtown, mothers with younger children were just as likely to send their 3- and 4-year-olds to pre-school as were mothers without younger children. However, we again noticed a difference between the ethnic groups. Among mothers with younger children,

the Pakehas were more likely to send their children to pre-school than were mothers from other ethnic groups. Of the children at pre-schools who had younger brothers or sisters, 61% were Pakehas. It would seem that the pressure of younger children is a less serious handicap for Pakeha mothers than it is for mothers from other ethnic groups.

Recent Mobility

Newtown is a suburb with a large number of migrants. In fact 44% of the parents interviewed had lived there for less than four years. Previous research and the reasons given by some of the parents we spoke to, had led us to expect that new residents would be less likely to enrol their children at pre-school than would parents who were more settled in the area. But this was not so; there was no significant difference in the numbers of children attending between parents who had lived in the suburbs for less than four years and those who had lived there for four years or more. Among the new arrivals, Maori parents were the least likely to have enrolled their children. On the other hand, although only 36% of those who were settled were Pacific Islanders, 49% of the mothers who had lived in Newtown for 4 years or more and who had not enrolled their children at pre-school were Pacific Islanders. This reflects the general difficulty that Pacific Islanders have in getting their children to a pre-school.

Isolation

Newtown is a suburb where many different people come to live, many of them for a comparatively short time. They come from many different parts of the world and they represent a variety of ethnic groups and have many different languages. It would be scarcely surprising if many people felt isolated and co-operated very little with their neighbours. Indeed we found that the majority (71%) of the mothers did not have any friends available for occasional child minding. Many of our interviewers felt that the mothers they spoke to were lonely people with few friends. They felt too that it was through friendship with other mothers that women

learnt of the local pre-schools, especially the kindergartens. The more isolated mothers, since friends, neighbours and relatives are an important source of local information, were less likely to be aware of what pre-school facilities there were in the neighbourhood. We found that at the 3-year-old level that if the parents had no friends few of their children went to pre-school —76% did not attend. Of the parents who had friends, only 56% of their children did not attend. This effect was, however, much less noticeable among the 4-year-olds.

We expected too that the non-Pakehas would be more isolated than were the Pakehas. Although the various ethnic groups were put together (for analysis) into four categories they are not all the same. A Greek is not likely to have much in common with an Indian and a Tongan may just as seldom speak to a Samoan. The Pakehas alone were likely to be culturally and linguistically the same. We looked at the families where the mothers had no friends available for child minding. We found that at each age level there were more Pacific Islanders'not going to a pre-school than any other ethnic group. Conversely, at each age level there were more Pakehas attending than for any other ethnic group. It is easier for Pakehas and Maoris and Asians who have no friends or neighbours willing to mind their children to get their children to pre-school, than it is for Pacific Islanders who are similarly placed. A lack of local contact is a more significant obstacle to pre-school for Pacific Islanders than it is for Pakehas.

Chance not Choice?

A chance circumstance —low socio-economic status, young babies, or isolation —is not by itself likely to keep a mother from enrolling her child at pre-school. But when any one of these circumstances occur in a family with a mother from the Pacific Islands, the chances of them exerting a strong pull against pre-school enrolment are greatly increased. This pull seems to be stronger for mothers from the Pacific Islands than from any of the other ethnic groups living in Newtown.

Asking for reasons was difficult. In the first place the

question implied that if there was a reason for non-enrolment, that reason should be a good one. The previous questions had asked for information about attendance. So it was, in practice, quite difficult for the interviewers to make their tone non-threatening. It soon became evident that many mothers had no particular reason for their child's non-attendance. They had never made a conscious decision not to send the child to pre-school, and if they did offer a reason, they were rarely confident that it was a good one. Some mothers offered quite complex explanations, as the comments of our interviewers reveal.

"Confusion of responsibility —child minded by grandmother who says mother will decide."

"Child minded by relative who couldn't cope."

"Respondent's mother had a road accident and so respondent doesn't like to take her daughter to kindy."

(She was afraid of pedestrian road accidents).

Some mothers were unable or unwilling to give a reason:

"Hasn't thought about it —no real reasons —thinks it's important but just hasn't got around to it yet."

There was a general indecisiveness and no single reason predominated. Positive disapproval by the mother was given as the main reason in ten cases, (11%). But the number of mothers of the 4-year-old non-attenders who claimed that they disapproved of pre-school was more than twice as high as the number of mothers of 3-year-olds who made a similar claim. The mothers of the 3-year-olds have time to change their minds. It is possible that the mothers of the older children felt more defensive and their attitudes had hardened by this time.

A number of mothers reported difficulties of one sort or another but many, in fact, had not attempted to enroll their children. It was quite common for these mothers to report that they had heard that the kindergarten was full and that there was no point in trying. Only one mother reported that she had no knowledge of pre-school services. For the most part the parents were willing for their children to attend, so extra

publicity about the value of pre-school education is probably not likely to make much difference. Indeed the majority of the mothers of those children who did not attend any pre-school would be quite willing for their children to go —if their circumstances had been different.

How different would those circumstances have to be?

What Next?

Our research suggests several impractical changes to circumstances: if the socio-economic status of everyone in Newtown was raised, if all the families took up European ways exclusively, if all the families were smaller, then the number of children attending pre-school would probably rise.

However, one practical suggestion can be made on the basis of the research. If mothers were less isolated, if they had more friends, and in particular had more friends who already had children at pre-school, then they would be much more likely to send their children along, and join in where appropriate. This particularly applies to Polynesian mothers. They are the least likely to have children attending, they are the most lonely and isolated, the ones with the fewest friends who already have children at pre-school. Also they are the people whose culture is most people-oriented, to whom personal contact means most, much more than notices, well meaning invitations, and publicity drives. And once they have been personally introduced to a pre-school, they will make more friends and in turn be able to introduce others to the pre-school. Nothing should succeed like success.

One kindergarten had a short waiting list, the other had none. So there were places for some of the children who do not attend. However, some more pre-schools would have to be started to make a place for every child. Any move to do so would be a golden opportunity to investigate the possibility of encouraging a type of pre-school which was not large and institutional, and very much in keeping with the multi-cultural character of the area.

Footnotes

¹ See Elley, W.B. and Irving, J.C. "A Socio-economic Index for New Zealand...." New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, No. 7, pp.153-167. The use made of this is discussed in, Jamieson, Penelope A.B. "Who doesn't get to pre-school in Newtown?: Full Report" unpublished paper (Wellington, NZCER, 1977)

² Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Pre-school Education (Hill Report) (Wellington : Department of Education, 1971)

³ *Who gets to Pre-school? The Availability of Pre-school Education in New Zealand* (Wellington : NZCER, 1975)

⁴ Meade A. *An Organisational Study of the Playcentre and Free Kindergarten Movements in New Zealand*, PhD Victoria University of Wellington, 1978

⁵ Howard, A.M.M., J.Johnstone and P.McGregor "The Reasons why Parents do not send their children to pre-schools" Unpublished paper (University Extension, Massey University) 1975

⁶ M. de Lemos and P.Larsen "Supplementary Discussion on Pre-school Attendance and School Achievement" unpublished paper.

⁷ Elley W.B. and J.C.Irving "A Socio-economic index for New Zealand based on levels of education and income from the 1966 census" *NZJES*, 11 p.153-167, 1972. Scale 1, 2, 3.

⁸ Ibid Scale, 4.5.6.

The twenty-three languages identified during the survey were

Bengali	Chinese	Cook Island
Dutch	English	German
Greek	Gujarati	Hindi
Hungarian	Japanese	Maori
Malay	Niue	Polish
Rumanian	Russian	Samoan
Singalese	Tongan	Turkish
Ukranian	Yugoslav	