

The "New Education Fellowship" in New Zealand: Its Activity and Influence in the 1930s and 1940s

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The "New Education Fellowship" in New Zealand: Its Activity and Influence in the 1930s and 1940s

The New Education Fellowship (NEF) was active in New Zealand in the 1930s and 1940s. A number of its members, including H.C.D. Somerset, A.E. Campbell and C.E. Beeby, were influential in education policy and curriculum development for the compulsory education sector. This paper describes the operation of the organisation in New Zealand in an effort to reflect the collective philosophy of a group of educational activists, including politicians, government education officials and academics who helped shape the system of education provision, curriculum and pedagogy. Information is derived largely from archival records at the Institute of Education, London. These archives are not a complete record of the workings of the NEF in New Zealand or internationally. However, they provide a broad ranging record and give interesting insights into the thoughts and motivations of educators who were influential in determining New Zealand's education policy in the 1930s and 1940s.

The recent decade has seen considerable debate about the nature and likely impact of recent administrative, curricular and assessment reforms in New Zealand schools (Olssen and Morris Matthews, 1997) In this context of rapid change it may be timely to recall an earlier time of strong public interest and debate about changes in primary and secondary education in New Zealand. During the 1930s and 1940s the principles of education which would dominate curriculum and the system of provision for the next 50 years emerged as dominant forces. It was a time when a particular 'egalitarian' philosophy of public education was established. Today some would consider this philosophy to have been thoroughly compromised by recent developments. Others would consider it to have been rightly superseded. However, what consideration of the NEF in the 1930s and 1940s probably best highlights is a time when educational debate and reform was more democratic and genuinely open to a range of viewpoints than has been our recent experience.

THE NEW EDUCATION FELLOWSHIP

The NEF was an international organisation with the avowed aim to

"further educational improvement and reform throughout the world so that every individual - whatever his nationality, race, status or religion - shall be educated under conditions which

allow of the full and harmonious development of his whole personality, and lead to his realizing and fulfilling his responsibilities to the community" (*The New Era in Home and School*, 1938c, iv).

This was essentially a philosophy of egalitarianism, in the sense that the NEF sought an ideal of fairness in education. The Fellowship provided an agency for collaboration between educational innovators and recognition of 'radical' movements in education (Wallace, 1986). It stood at the 'progressive' edge of educational thought, but not beyond the boundary of academic and political respectability. Progressive ideals were promoted by internationally recognised educators and psychologists, and within universities and teacher training institutions, especially in Britain and the United States (Middleton and May, 1997, pp.23-24; Openshaw, 1978, p.179).

The NEF was founded in England in 1921, according to Wallace (1986) and Openshaw (1978, p.198). Campbell (1938, p.497) gives the founding year as 1915. Boyd and Rawson (1965, pp.57-58) are of the view that the NEF filled an organisational void created at the end of World War I. They indicate that an International Education Office, similar to the recently created International Labour Office, was needed at the time to cooperate with the League of Nations and address the educational challenges of post war Europe. Such an office was not established and the role was filled by the voluntary agency of the NEF. Five countries provided the leadership for the NEF - Switzerland, the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany. However, adherents to the movement were also active in other European countries, Scandinavia, the Commonwealth and Asia.

The governing authority of the international body in the early decades included large numbers of academic staff from universities and teacher training institutions, school principals and political figures. Organisational support was based in England, at the international headquarters, but the Fellowship had an international character. For example, in 1934-1936 the international governing body of nineteen included university personnel (Dr. Boyd, Head of the Department of Education, Glasgow University; Prof. Clarke, Director elect of the Institute of Education, London; and members from the University of Sofia, Columbia University and Harvard University), three heads of schools (from Stockholm, Helsingfors and Detroit), a newspaper editor from Switzerland and the Director of the Toronto Art Gallery (*NEF Report for 1934-1936*). A mark of the organisation's political respectability is the presence on the patrons and supporters lists of past and present presidents of the English Board of Education, the Secretary for State for the Colonies and the Secretary for State for the Dominions. International respectability is suggested by the positions on

the Executive Board in the early 1950s held by C. Beeby, New Zealand's Director of Education, and Prof. K. Saiyidain, Joint Education Advisor to the Government of India (*Diary of the New Education Fellowship 1920-1952*; WEF III 187).

The NEF had idealistic aims. There was a belief that changes in schooling could help bring about a better future for individuals and enhance international relations. The organisation emerged from a climate of economic difficulties and social conflict - from war and economic recession - that inspired interest in social inequalities and notions of collective responsibility for social ills.

Education was viewed as a means for achieving social 'fairness' in the future (Wallace, 1986, p.10).

A feeling for the enthusiasm towards the NEF held by members and workers for the organisation during a subsequent time of crisis adjustment is provided by Miss Soper (NEF General Secretary).

Since the [outbreak of] war we have held a number of small conferences in England which become more and more popular. There is a great ferment in the educational world and members like to come together to discuss. They are more eager and more awake than in peace time. (letter Soper to Parkyn (Secretary of the Dunedin NEF group), 10 July, 1941, WEF (World Education Fellowship) II 138)

The ideas and philosophies expressed by the new educationalists and NEF members may have been conflicting, as noted by Wallace (1986, pp.20-21) and Selleck (1968, p.335), but they presented a dramatic change in educational thinking. Represented within the 'new education' movement that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a range of ideas. Selleck (1968) categorises the 'new education' theorists as practical educationists, social reformers, naturalists, Herbartians, scientific educationists and moral educationists. Some of these groups were at variance with each other. For example, the Naturalists thought children should be given the right environment and allowed to develop naturally, whereas the Herbartians thought children needed training or moulding to produce desirable moral actions. Many of the ideas presented in the NEF forum stemmed from the 'new' psychology of child development followed by people such as Adolphe Ferriere and Jean Piaget. Both were on the NEF governing body. In 1921 Ferriere helped formulate the broad statement of NEF philosophy at the International Congress of the organisation's inception (Cumming and Cumming, 1978, p.218; *NEF Report for 1934-1936*). Also influential were the ideas of Dewey, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Tolstoy, Montessori and Freud (Wallace, 1986, p.12; Boyd and Rawson, 1965, p.1). From such people came ideas supporting the principles of democratic government where all had a voice, elimination of class barriers and the full

development of the individual.

The NEF also had roots in the Theosophical Society, with which Beatrice Ensor (founder of the NEF) had strong associations. The Society provided an alternative to mainstream Christianity and a mixture of eastern and western religious philosophy. The Theosophical founders aimed "to develop a philosophical system claiming to reveal the divine wisdom and true knowledge of the existence and nature of man" (Wallace, 1986, p.35; Boyd and Rawson, 1965, p.67). A statement of aims, probably part of the document sent to prospective members of the Auckland branch in 1938 and similar to statements made by various NEF officials, appears to echo the theosophical philosophy.

All are welcome within the Fellowship who accept the obligation to meet as persons not as representatives of any particular religious, political or even educational creed and whose fundamental attitude is to education themselves, both directly through an increase in knowledge and indirectly through a change of attitude towards others. The primary purpose of the Fellowship is to end the separation, due to ignorance and fear, which at present divides so many of us from one another. The N.E.F. is non-political and non-sectarian and is not confined to the narrow interests of the teacher but rather taking the child as its centre, it concerns itself with all the influences that bear upon him. It cooperates therefore, not only with parents and teachers, but with social workers and internationally minded people in many different fields and in all countries. (WEF II 139)

The creation of the NEF provided a non-governmental forum for debate on and the promotion of the wide ranging and sometimes conflicting ideas popularly labelled as "new education". Boyd and Rawson (1965, p.1) consider that in the early part of the century the legacy of Rousseau and Pestalozzi was spent but that a conviction remained that education should be based on personal interest and take into consideration the learner's point of view. In general, the NEF promoted child-centred and more active and practical education, rather than education with an emphasis on knowledge and subject content. K.G. Saiyidain (1937, p.265), in his inaugural address to the first NEF conference to be held in India, expressed the view that:

Education has often, in the past, paid too much attention to such factors as curriculum, examinations, and inspection - and not enough to the actual child, his psychology, his needs, his creative urges, and pulsating life. The New Education has brought about a 'Copernican Revolution' by placing the child in the centre of the stage and relegating everything else to secondary importance...

The NEF was imbued with a spirit of optimism - a belief that education could and should change society for the better. Changing international economic and political conditions provided a climate

in which it could expand. The growth of the NEF coincided with the international political reversal from laissez faire economics and the more active promotion of the welfare state in western developed nations.

Progressive education grew in popularity in the period between the two world wars in many western nations, including New Zealand. Middleton and May (1997, p.24) are of the opinion that New Zealand "was not at the centre of the formation of progressive education ideas", but neither was it a "backwater". Openshaw (1978) describes the growth of an indigenous progressive movement in New Zealand in the 1920s, led initially by a few key individuals, but growing in strength and influence. He describes the development of a bond between educational progressives and the Labour Party. This association would facilitate educational reform in the 1930s and establish progressive education as the new orthodoxy. There was no NEF structure in New Zealand in the 1920s. However, individual educators subscribed to the *New Era*, the magazine of the British NEF. Progressive ideas were promoted by individual enthusiasts and through the New Zealand teachers' journal, *National Education* (Openshaw, 1978, p.185-186). The creation of New Zealand branches of the NEF in the 1930s and the enthusiasm for the 1937 NEF conference was a natural extension of the sympathy for progressive education held by influential New Zealand educators and Labour Party politicians.

THE 1937 CONFERENCE

The NEF in New Zealand was influential in stimulating enthusiasm for educational reform and fostering a belief in a positive future for education. It was particularly potent in the late 1930s. The Fellowship did not direct New Zealand's education policy. The Labour government had already formulated many of its ideas for education reform before the influential conference of 1937. These ideas included a compulsory core curriculum for primary and secondary schools, universal secondary education and educational 'equality' supported by the welfare state (albeit a limited and paternalistic concept of what 'equality' in education meant). In his first speech as Minister of Education, Fraser expressed the view that education should develop the personality of each child, that education should assist boys and girls to develop mentally, physically and morally into the best types of men and women (*National Education*, 1936a, p.8) The Minister of Finance, Nash, in

a speech at Petone Memorial Technical College's end of year ceremony in 1935, supported reforms such as a more extensive general education before specialisation, a raised leaving age, and "reorganising the system" to redefine what must be taught in the compulsory years (*National Education*, 1936b, p.15) Nevertheless, the NEF conference reinforced government policy with international respectability.

In 1937 the NEF held a conference in New Zealand, organised as an extension of the conference planned for Australia. The fellowship delegation to Australia and New Zealand comprised twenty one lecturers from Austria, Canada, Denmark, England, Japan, Scotland, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States. Fourteen visiting speakers from seven countries presented lectures in New Zealand. Week long sessions were held in the four major centres - Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin - attended by educationalists and the public (Campbell, 1938; *The New Era in Home and School*, 1938a, p.1). The conference was politically sanctioned and actively supported by the New Zealand government. Peter Fraser, the Minister of Education, closed the schools in each of the centres for the duration of the conference so that teachers could attend. The Minister attended many of the sessions in Wellington. The government took responsibility for the transport of delegates throughout New Zealand. Fraser and the Director of Education were on the organising committee and Beeby, Director of the NZCER, was responsible for briefing visitors and general professional matters (Beeby, 1992, pp.103 & 105).

The New Zealand and Australian conference papers and discussion dealt with international understanding, social issues, curriculum and examination reform, psychology and child development, elementary and secondary schooling, adult and university education, rural education and teacher training. A recurrent theme was the idea of "democracy" in education, however variously conceived by speakers. Some spoke of education for democracy; that is, education for citizenship, opposition to totalitarianism and tyranny, and the attainment of a thinking 'educated democracy'. These were important concerns for educators and politicians, given the growing tension in Europe. Some spoke of 'educational democracy' as education to meet the needs of the many, of 'equality' in education. Some considered the democratic ideal in a spiritual sense, as the attainment of freedom for individuals to express themselves. Speakers presented their ideas on how to achieve these ideals, on how the 'old' education might be transcended by the 'new' (*The New Era in Home and School*, 1938b).

Beeby's recollections of the conference describe a mood of optimism. Within New Zealand's education circles there was a belief that education could redress earlier social wrongs and make amends to younger generations for the stresses of war and economic recession. He also gives an indication of the impact of the conference on the thinking of the government and educationalists, of which he was to be one of the most influential in his future role as Director of Education. The NEF Conference was "... a new venture that was to mark a turning-point in New Zealand education and, incidentally, to alter the whole course of my life and my thinking on education" (Beeby, 1992, p.103). The 1937 conference and its concern with the social responsibility of educationists reinforced the welfare state ideals of the government, principles of 'universal' education, and encouraged an education climate sympathetic to curriculum reform.

That the conference was popular and a success for the organisers there can be little doubt. Boyd and Rawson (1965, p.110) describe the Australian and New Zealand venture as an "educational crusade". Just under six thousand teachers registered for lectures or seminars and approximately twenty thousand people took part in conference related activities in New Zealand. This impression of enthusiasm and the general popularity of the conference is supported by reports that halls with a capacity of over 3,000 people were booked as venues for the more popular speakers and that these lectures were full. Some lectures were broadcast on national radio (Boyd and Rawson, 1965, p.110; Campbell, 1938, p.xiii). New Zealanders, then, showed an interest that went beyond that of committed teaching professionals to include and inform educational administrators, politicians and the public in debate on 'new education' issues.

The 1937 Conference and the new education movement were not without detractors. Openshaw (1987, p.196) indicates that in the 1930s excitement for progressive education ideals was not generally shared by people outside professional education circles. Parents, businessmen, politicians and teachers tended to hold traditional ideas about the function and style of schooling. The editor of the NZEI (New Zealand Educational Institute) journal, E.S. Andrews, responded in his editorial column and comments to criticisms about new education and the 1937 Conference. He reacted to a piece in an unnamed journal that described new education as "anti-patriotic, anti-religious, sexy and subversive" (*National Education*, 1938, p.214) and against comments in a national bulletin that criticised the government for shutting down schools for a week to have "teachers of the Dominion doped at a New Education Fellowship Conference" (Andrews, 1938,

p.42). The government received some criticism for supporting the new ideas of progressive education. However, the educational fraternity, represented by the NZEI, supported government reforms and the NEF child-centred ideology. Andrews (1938, p.42) wrote:

The new education is not a creed. It is not even new except so far as it is now more widely spread than ever before. "New Education" is merely a convenient label for the work of those who believe, rightly or wrongly, that human life can be a dignified, joyful and creative process, and that the way to that desirable end is through education that will treat children as children. To ensure that...children shall reach full mental, emotional and physical maturity is its aim.

The selected comments of teachers who attended the 1937 conference, as recorded by Middleton and May (1997, pp.27-27), reflect a sense of excitement and stimulation among those sympathetic to new education ideals.

NEF ACTIVITIES

The 1937 conference inspired the creation of eight NEF groups in New Zealand - Auckland in 1937; Christchurch, Dunedin and Wellington in 1938, Feilding and Wanganui in 1940; Palmerston North and Timaru in 1941. The first New Zealand group was the Vasanta group in Auckland, founded in 1933 (Membership and Section Records). On August 28, 1941, the New Zealand Section was constituted - Auckland, Wanganui, Feilding, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin are identified as founding branches (Membership and Section Records; Amended Constitution of the New Zealand Section). The NEF could not be said to have had a large membership - in 1943 the New Zealand membership totalled approximately 400, and had increased to approximately 473 in 1946 - but it had a wide ranging membership in its heyday of the late 1930s/early 1940s.

In the Auckland Group's Report of Activities for 1939 (WEF II 139) it is recorded that there were 14 "groups" (local units) active in the region, both urban and rural. Most were a mixture of teachers and parents, but some had more varied memberships and some were homogenous - two groups (one of six and one of eight members) were made up solely of teachers or Teachers' Training College personnel; one group of ten was exclusively female, with a majority of young married women and no teachers; one was a group of ten to fifteen student teachers; one group comprised the "headmasters of two Secondary Schools, one private and one state, teachers, a farmer, an electrician,

a bank manager, a doctor and his wife (Jewish refugees) several labour party members and two keen communists". Some groups were more active than others. A wide range of projects were undertaken by various small groups. The Auckland Group newsletter for July 1939 (WEF II 139) records that

Reports from country groups indicate growing interest and keenness in the N.E.F. Helensville has now expanded to 2 groups; Omana, Wellsford and Pukekohe are making realist approach [sic] to problems of curriculum. Otahuhu has inaugurated a series of discussions, held at the High School, for the purpose of interesting new members. They have recently exchanged visits with Vasanta Group. In Auckland City groups have met regularly and some combined meetings have been held. Ponsonby sponsored a splendid evening at which 3 topics were introduced by members of visiting groups. "Do I make my child nervous?" "Do I make my child disobedient?" "Do I make my child dishonest?" The standard of presentation of these topics and discussion reached a high standard.

The Auckland Group Report of Activities (WEF II 139) records various projects undertaken by the smaller groups. One local group, all teachers in a rural North Auckland area, had an aim for 1939 "to cover a small survey of the arithmetic matter used by the average farmers of our district" and planned to hold a meeting with parents for "discussion on the modern trends in education, with particular reference to the New Freedom so that the aim of much of the school life shall be better understood". Another group, of eleven members comprising teachers, parents and a newspaper editor, stated it was "concerned with the matter of films and magazines in the community" and was also "examining the school curriculum". One group was interested in doing something "a bit more 'active'" and was looking to organise a play centre for children of pre-school age, having already acquired "premises" in the parish hall, with a piano and quarter acre of grassed area for play. Other groups expressed interest in topics as varied as children's art work, extrasensory perception, international affairs, the "treatment and education of the Maori race", recreation facilities, nursery school, child development, and home and school relations.

The Dunedin branch formed groups for the purpose of undertaking practical investigations. An undated list of "Proposed Experiments" (WEF II 139) identifies nineteen groups, each with an idea for an experiment. The experiment topics include studies of "backward and problem children", development of expressive arts, grouping students into ability streams, teacher-pupil relationships, and investigations in particular subjects or skills.

The NEF thus provided a mechanism for communities to be involved in education

discussions, even if the numbers actively involved were small and enthusiasm for action did not last long. The organisation attracted members interested in educational issues, and who were hopeful of change. Optimism for a more ideal world, which it was hoped the NEF would help create, is expressed by H.C.D. Somerset, who was an active and keen member of the Feilding NEF and involved in a project for community education.

I am coming to believe that civilization needs a new form - a new mansion for the human spirit - something as completely related to life as the medieval church was - but related to this scientific age - and also serving as an antidote to it. (letter to Soper, 16 December, 1941, WEF II 138)

THE LEGACY

It appears that the enthusiasm and activity of the late 1930s and early 1940s were short lived in New Zealand. However, a number of educationists who were, or would be, in positions to influence government policy, and the thinking of teachers, were associated with the NEF. The interest shown in the NEF by influential educationists is indicative of openness to change and willingness on their part to question current practices. It may also reflect a desire by leading New Zealand educators to establish international links, or to maintain a connection with 'mother' England by supporting an organisation centred in London.

Correspondence provides evidence of continuing, if irregular, contact between some of New Zealand's education leaders, who were also local NEF personnel, and the Secretaries of the International Office of the NEF in London, Miss Clare Soper and her successor Mr Annand. It suggests that New Zealand educationalists remained active in the NEF in varying degrees and maintained an interest in the NEF and its ideals through the 1940s (WEF II 138; WEF V 271). Correspondence and the Membership and Section Records indicate that a number of chairpersons or secretaries of the local NEF branches or of the New Zealand Section were associated with university colleges or teacher training colleges in the four main centres, the Department of Education, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), or with government appointed committees (WEF II 44B).

Those active in an organisational capacity in the NEF often held, or came to hold, positions with influence in education. For example, H.C.D. Somerset ran the Feilding Community Centre, an

experiment begun in 1938 to develop "further education" - nursery education, parent education and the "usual adult work". He was secretary of the Feilding branch of the NEF from 1940-1941. Somerset moved to Wellington and a position in the Department of Education at Victoria College, and was subsequently appointed Joint Secretary to the Consultative Committee on the Post Primary Curriculum - the Thomas Committee (letter from Somerset to Soper, 16 December, 1941, WEF II 138; letter to Somerset of 27 March, 1944, probably from Miss Soper, WEF II 138; Cumming and Cumming, 1978, p.256). F.C. Lopdell held the position of Principal of Wellington Teachers' Training College. He became President of the New Zealand Section of the NEF in 1944. Lopdell reported strong interest in the NEF at the College, stating that it was "a college that is in full sympathy with NEF ideals and most of whose staff are members of the local branch" (letter from Lopdell to Lauwerys, 26 February, 1945, WEF II 138). He became the first Superintendent of Education, a position created in the late 1940s, then Chief Inspector of Primary Schools in 1950 (Cumming and Cumming, 1978, pp.290 & 296). W.C. McQueen was secretary of the New Zealand Section from 1944-1947. He was with the NZCER, leaving the Council in 1947 to take up the newly formed position of Commissioner of Apprenticeships. C.L. Gillies, founding president of the New Zealand Section and secretary of the Auckland branch 1939-1942, was from Auckland Teacher Training College. G.W. Parkyn, from Dunedin, was secretary of that branch in the early 1940s and acted as Secretary of the New Zealand Section from 1949. He became Director of the NZCER after A.E. Campbell in 1953. C.E. Beeby, perhaps the most influential person in New Zealand education at this time, maintained an interest in and helped support the NEF. He held a position on the international Executive Board of the NEF, which he relinquished in December 1951 when he did not make himself available for re-election. When he was in Paris as Assistant Director General of UNESCO in 1948-1949 he maintained support for the NEF by helping secure a grant of £250 from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to help fund the administration operations of the NEF international office. The NEF international headquarters was in financial crisis at this time and made several applications to UNESCO for aid between 1948 and 1950 (WEF V 271). Thus, the NEF in New Zealand was associated with individuals with considerable influence in the educational community, and several who had input into policy at a national level.

A lasting legacy of the new education ideals is the New Zealand playcentre movement. The

NEF provided support for playcentre, both ideologically and financially. Surplus funds from the 1937 Conference were used to supply grants to the Wellington and Christchurch playcentres. The playcentre organisation, established in 1941, kept alive the principles of the NEF (Densem, 1980, pp.89-90). Beatrice Beeby, wife of C.E. Beeby, was the founding president of the Wellington Nursery Play Centres' Association (Densem, 1980, p.92). Gwen Somerset, wife of H.C.D. Somerset, was also active in the playcentre movement (Densem, 1980, p.95). Playcentre reflects NEF ideals in its focus on developing the whole child - intellectually, emotionally and socially - and by involving parents and the community in the process of learning.

IN DECLINE

The NEF and Labour government's ideas for 'new education' did not go unchallenged in New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s. Lopdell wrote of an education conference in November, 1944, that was called by the Minister of Education and involved teachers, business associations, sports bodies, religious groups, youth associations and the Returned Servicemen's Association:

I am pleased to say that in general the New Education as we understand it received general support, and though some representatives strongly criticised the modern tendencies in our schools the conference revealed that there was confidence in the philosophy and principles of Education that we have been trying to put into effect, especially during the last decade. (letter from Lopdell to Lauwerys, 26 February, 1945, WEF II 138)

Beeby wrote, in response to a request for financial assistance from the NEF international office:

I cannot see any great chance just at the moment of getting an annual grant from the Government. As you may perhaps have heard, the Department over the last year or two has been getting a fairly severe grilling from certain sections of the community about its 'new education' leanings, and although the things for which we stand have been pretty completely vindicated, I do not think that the present is perhaps an opportune time to try to get a special item on my Estimates for assistance to the N.E.F., much as I should like to do it. (letter from Beeby to Soper, 22 June, 1951, WEF II 138)

Much of the activity of the NEF in New Zealand appears to have depended on the enthusiasm of key educationalists, and declined when they no longer had the inclination or time to devote to NEF affairs. Sympathy with the movement did not necessarily translate into active support for the NEF, especially when New Zealand appeared to have a government happy to

implement many 'new education' principles and the challenge of reform did not fall to the NEF. Concern was expressed about the future of the NEF in New Zealand relatively early on, and the Fellowship was well in decline in the late 1940s and effectively non-operational by the late 1950s.

The enthusiasm that greeted the creation of NEF branches does not appear to have carried through for more than a few years in the activity of branches. Gillies wrote of the Auckland branch in 1941:

I feel a little bit pessimistic about the fewness of our numbers and in the numbers of those who really want a changed world because of a real change in their own heart. No other basis of change seems worth considering... (letter from Gillies to Soper, 18 August, 1941, WEF II 138)

With the adoption of many NEF ideals by New Zealand's government and the experience of a peace time climate much of the fervour for the NEF appears to have abated. Gillies reported in 1948 that:

The health of N.E.F. fluctuates in N.Z. Auckland goes along with about 3 groups in action. Many have graduated to work at educational jobs in the community. We have not been getting in enough new young people . . . Wellington, has a good branch, meeting as a unit with special evenings and topics. Wanganui and Feilding are quiet but that may be because there has been no news letter to tell us about them. Chch. is always strong. The educational centre of gravity of N.Z. is somewhere there in the South Island! Timaru and Nelson I think are still in operation. (letter from Gillies to Soper, 24 July, 1948, WEF II 138)

In 1958 Parkyn wrote:

Over the past ten years the branches of the NEF in this country have one by one died out, the main reason being the very great growth of specific purpose educational groups such as Parent-Teacher Associations, Nursery Play Centre groups, Parents' Centres, and so on into which all our NEF people have put their efforts - pragmatic colonials - because these mark the growing points of education in this country. (letter from Parkyn to Annand, 2 December, 1958, WEF II 138)

The time of greatest strength for the NEF in New Zealand was the period of educational questioning and anticipated reform in the decade straddling 1940. It stimulated debate on educational issues and provided impetus for change. The ideals promoted by the NEF were in large part adopted formally by the New Zealand Labour government and the Department of Education in their education reforms, a situation that appears to have acted against the long term prospects for the NEF in New Zealand.

60 YEARS ON

In many respects, the legacy of child centred education promoted by the NEF has endured in New Zealand education. Subject curricula of the 1990s emphasise the development of skills and activities based learning. The 1997 Social Studies curriculum statement includes the principle of education for citizenship (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.7), an idea which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. In the post second world war period ideals such as universal access to secondary education and the existence of a common core curriculum came to be largely taken for granted. Today's debates revolve around issues of standards and 'quality', disputed notions of what constitutes equity in education and the acceptability of a market approach to education as a replacement for the social justice discourse established in the 1930s and 1940s (Codd, Harker & Nash, 1985; McCulloch, 1992; Middleton, Codd & Jones, 1990, Olssen & Morris Mathews, 1997).

Viewed from the 1990s, the 'new education' movement provides a useful reminder of a pre-Tomorrow's Schools and pre-National Curriculum era of schooling. It was a time when a sense of collective responsibility for reducing socio-economic inequalities saw curriculum reform and centralisation of provision through government intervention and when idealism perhaps created more tolerance for genuinely exploring a range of educational perspectives. Disregard for this collective social justice ideal, and the educational policies and practices which accompanied it for half a century, forms the root of current debate as individualism is stressed and a market oriented approach to education is increasingly enforced.

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- Diary of the New Education Fellowship 1920-1952*. WEF I 43A, 1934-1967
- Membership and Section Records. WEF II 44B, 1920-1960

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