

## **Rewi Alley's Educational Philosophy and Early Childhood Education**

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### **Abstract**

Rewi Alley's philosophy developed as a result of his family background and life experiences and was influenced by the works of philosophers Kant, Marx, Dewey and Bailie. But, most importantly it was the result of the political and social climate of the times. Rewi's sister, Gwen Somerset was also inspired by the philosophical values held by Rewi and his parents Frederick and Clara Alley and she set up the cooperative Playcentre movement. This revolutionary approach to preschool education which was child-centred and emphasized the importance of play, became the catalyst for changes within the mainstream early childhood education providers in New Zealand. The cooperative spirit of participation, ingenuity and enthusiasm still remains the corner stone of the Playcentre movement today. These preschools also provide opportunities for parents to learn about child development and allow families to manage and take responsibility for the administration and teaching through training courses and workshops with the aid of qualified educators. In China today, child centred preschools are enhancing children's readiness for primary school but there is still a major discrepancy in delivering high quality services in remote rural areas. A stimulating and creative environment using natural resources, ingenuity, and enthusiasm does not demand expensive and elaborate equipment and preschool cooperatives based on the Playcentre model could fill a useful role in China's rural areas.

### **Background**

All philosophies are developed out of the influences of life experiences, the environment and social background of the thinker and others who share their knowledge. But most importantly they are influenced from social and political ideals drawn from the particular social environment of the time. The works of other philosophers provide a basis on which all philosophers have built.

Rewi Alley was no exception. His parents were radical thinkers of the time. His father Fredrick Alley was passionate about education policy and progressive social philosophy and would have been influenced by Kant (the German philosopher and central figure of modern educational philosophy). Kant argued that children learn by doing and by using their prior knowledge and experiences. These ideas of learning were the key to Fredrick's teaching theories and then later to both Rewi and Gwen Somerset's philosophies of learning. Rewi's mother Clara and his aunt Amy were central figures in Rewi's life and his early childhood. As a child he and his siblings Gwen and Eric, spent many hours exploring their environment; sharing, playing, experimenting, questioning, creating, imagining and taking risks (Somerset, 1980). These experiences were important for the development of Rewi's educational ideas and no doubt influenced his ability to adapt to different environments. Fredrick also believed that children should contribute to the working of the household by doing chores. Both Clara and Fredrick were avid readers and so books became important to all the family (Somerset, 1998).

Rewi's experiences in World War 1 provided a background for development of his ideas about solidarity shared with comrades, the value of cooperative team work, and the sharing of ideas and resources. The loss of his brother and war comrades, being severely wounded, and the hardship and destruction he experienced, all contributed to his distaste of war and his love for humanity. Rehabilitating after the war as a farmer in the remote Moeawatea Valley in New Zealand helped develop his understanding of the importance of being resourceful, developing practical skills and creative thinking. During this time he learnt the value of hard work, ingenuity, and cooperation, in the face of limited resources, isolation and disappointment. All this strengthened the foundations of his philosophy (Alley, 1997).

The poverty and appalling working conditions witnessed when he arrived in Shanghai motivated him to become involved in Chinese social issues after he saw first hand that his own practical efforts were insufficient to alleviate the poverty and exploitation of Chinese workers and peasants. The Japanese invasion with its destruction of factories and industries made him realise the necessity of bringing together available resources and putting into action the Gong He (Gung Ho) spirit of working together.

By combining all these background experiences, and revisiting the works of Kant, Marx and Dewey, Rewi formulated his ideas on education and social policy. These ideas were strengthened after meeting Joseph Bailie who played a significant role in developing Rewi's "Learning by Doing" and "Hearts and Minds Together" philosophy. Bailie was a missionary in China and after nearly 40 years he had the ability to co-opt others and the necessary contacts to help Rewi implement their ideas. The American philosopher Dewey (1938) was also a missionary working in China who was influential in their thinking.

### **The Work of Gwen Somerset**

Rewi's elder sister Gwen, a teacher in New Zealand also shared similar ideas drawn from the philosophies of Kant and Dewey and was influenced by her father Fredrick's forward thinking on educational concerns. Gwen studied the nature of early childhood development and the role of preschool education in meeting the needs of the community, children and families. For her, in order to promote the theory that children learn from birth through experimenting, exploring the environment, and through play, she saw that the educational focus needed to shift from being teacher/ instructor orientated to being child centred. Opportunities to explore and test the environment should involve the provision of a broad variety of experiences involving play, sensory and creative activities such as storytelling and cooperative play. She saw this as a vital ingredient to the development of the whole child. Singing, dancing, drama, music, imaginative play, and excursions into the environment all help to express thoughts through the development of language and syntax. Rigid formal learning with an emphasis on rote teaching, she believed could stifle innovation, the ability to adapt to change and learning to make choices and decisions.

At the time when Rewi was working at establishing cooperative Bailie schools Gwen was banding together other women in New Zealand to form cooperative preschool centres during the absence of their fathers at war. This not only met the need to provide quality child centred education but also provided mothers with mutual support and learning together with their children. So successful was this approach that Gwen's philosophy of "learning by doing" and "play as children's work" saw the foundation of the Playcentre movement. Like Rewi, Gwen met the challenges of the time and the needs of local communities for education.

## **The New Zealand Playcentre - A True Cooperative**

The role of New Zealand Playcentres in influencing change within the main stream of early childhood education not only focused on constructing quality child-centred learning programmes but also sought to involve parents and extended families actively in learning together with their children and sharing knowledge and ideas with other families. Parents were expected to be involved in the routine of running and managing the centres cooperatively as well as working and playing alongside children helping them to use language to express their ideas and thoughts. Parents in Playcentres and Maori family play groups were provided with opportunities to learn together to master and apply new skills. In this way both children and family become empowered and in control of their own learning experiences at their own pace. The enthusiasm and commitment of the supervisors {leaders} and trainers encouraged and inspired family involvement.

Participation was important and adult education provided programs and booklets about early child development to enhance the parents and families understanding of how children learn and grow through play. A wide range of resources were collected and used and natural materials sort after.

Workshops and discussion groups run by the Playcentre leaders and the wider community involve two of the key principles of Rewi's philosophy; working together and the "hands on" approach of active learning. The quality of the centre's education programme is dependent on the enthusiasm and involvement of the whole team. Parents and family are encouraged to contribute in every aspect of the centre. Training of parents as helpers with education courses in child development is encouraged and young mothers and fathers can learn parenting skills. Storytelling, singing and dancing are part of the activities which emphasise cultural diversity and provide opportunities for families to contribute their own talents. Storytelling and drama can be a part of every aspect of play and utilise ingenuity skills, imagination and creativity (Grey, 1974; Somerset, 1976).

When Playcentres were first established parents were trained in the centre to become supervisors. Education officers from the federation administered and guided those parents who chose to increase their involvement in the organisation. The role of these officers was crucial in developing leadership and cooperative relations. Excellent programmes for training and teaching of administrators were established and organised by qualified officers dedicated to promoting the values and ideals inspired by Gwen Somerset. They aimed to provide both parents and children with the knowledge and skills to grow and meet the challenges of a changing world.

During the years that followed, Playcentre became a model for child-centred education along with that provided by the German Rudolf Steiner and Italian Montessori centres. However, Playcentre was the first to stimulate changes in mainstream state kindergartens.

All these three childhood education systems focused on guided child initiated learning. However they were each designed to cater for quite different alternative needs. In New Zealand, the needs of parents varied and new forms of provision arose. These included day care centres, home-based programs, Maori Kohanga Reo and numerous private preschools. However, the Playcentre cooperative style of education was still recognised as the best model to provide parenting skills and active learning for both children and parents.

## **Standardising the Curriculum for All Early Childhood Education Providers**

In 1996, the New Zealand Education Department took charge of training programs. It formulated a standardised curriculum for the training of early childhood teachers and supervisors as well as provisions for children. By involving and consulting with all the stake holders from the major providers (Kindergartens, Kohonga Reo, and Playcentre) the curriculum was set up. The aim was to ensure that quality child centred education was provided throughout the early child hood sector and that the guidelines would benefit everyone.

The benefits of the universal curriculum and guidelines ensured that all providers were expected to deliver the best teaching practises to meet the nurturing needs of all preschool children. However, by standardising and institutionalising services, some of the fundamental, core Playcentre values have been overshadowed by bureaucratic and academic demands. The increased paperwork and assessments required put unnecessary and often judgemental demands and pressure on the teachers, children and families. Consequently there has been loss of the involvement of parents as first teachers and decision makers. The importance of the parental role has been diminished, and thus the value of grassroots education has been somewhat undermined. The training of teachers in all sectors is provided and overseen by the state Education Department.

In my experience the best teachers are not necessarily those who are the best administrators but rather those who bring experience, enthusiasm and commitment to the class room and can work collaboratively with the help and guidance of supervisors/trainers who share their expertise, knowledge and passion.

## **Chinese Early Childhood Education**

There have been big changes in the provision of early child education with the introduction of child centred practices in China in the last few years. Recent research has shown that this new style of education has enhanced the children's progress and readiness for primary classes. In an address by the Deputy Minister of Education H.E Ms Chen Xiaoya {2010 World Conference on Early Childhood Education.} however, the speaker noted that there was still a major disparity between services provided between the urban and poor rural ethnic regions. In the conclusions drawn from three studies presented in a UNESCO report to the conference she noted that children who attended any preschool had better school readiness than those with no early childhood education and those attending high quality preschools had better school readiness in both literacy and mathematics (Chen, 2014).

In those remote rural areas where little or no funding to provide quality preschool education is available, family or community cooperatives as suggested by Gwen Somerset (Somerset, 1978) in "Vital Play" could meet this crucial educational challenge. Parents and families could use their skills and ingenuity to provide and build equipment and become committed and inspired preschool teachers with a stake in the quality of their early childhood centre. By learning with their children families would develop new skills and knowledge and at the same time pass on their own experience and culture.

Using the Gong He philosophy, preschool trainers could be used to provide information and support to equip parents families and communities with the knowledge needed to help them as first teachers to meet the challenges of a changing world. This may require academic input from qualified early childhood experts but it is also important that enthusiastic parents/grandparents are recruited

as first teachers and acknowledged for their contribution to the wellbeing of their families and the whole of society. By actively participating and making the most of these new skills, parents and carers will become equipped to make better use of their own talents and abilities and pass these on to preschool children in their care.

China does not need more bureaucrats or billionaires but it will need more highly skilled, hard working and innovative workers, technicians, scientists and artists in all fields to enrich the whole of society. Improvement in the quality of early childhood education will not only have economic benefits by providing a basis for future innovative technological development but will also broaden students understanding of their own and other cultures. In this way Rewi Alley's educational philosophy can be maintained and his internationalist spirit will continue and be available to help China face the global challenges that lie ahead.

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