

Audrey Grace NEWTON

Kindergarten teacher, Wellington Free Kindergarten Association



Figure 1: Miss Audrey NEWTON ca 1940, Wellington.

Audrey Newton Collection, Private procession

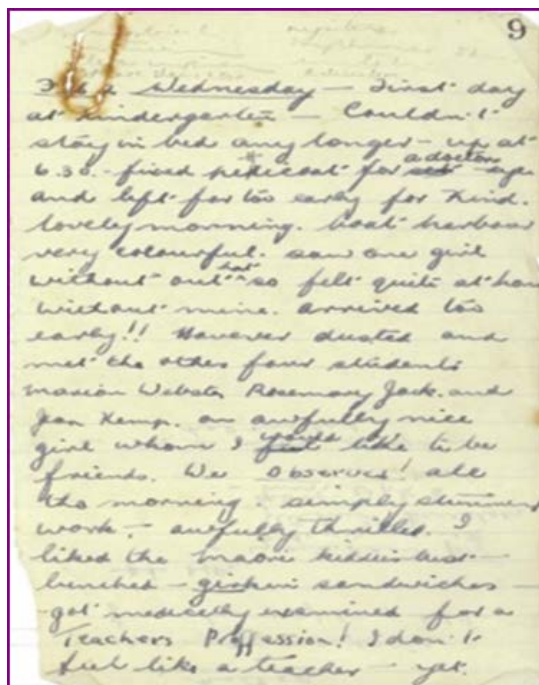
Timeline

Family name	Audrey Grace NEWTON
Other names used	Mrs W.J. SEWELL Audrey Sewell
Date of birth (& death if known)	27/9/1920 – 27/7/2000
Parents	Father: Howard H Newton Mother: Grace C Newton, nee Fardell
Nationality	New Zealander
Schooling	Hataitai School

	Queen Margaret College	
Teacher Training	1938	(17 yrs) February - Enrolled in Kindergarten Teacher Training, Wellington Free Kindergarten
	1939	November – Graduates
Employment (Wellington Free Kindergarten Association)	1940	Assistant Director at Wellington South Kindergarten
	1941	Ngaio Kindergarten
	1942	Berhampore Kindergarten
	1943–45	Assistant Director – Teacher Training
Employment (Occupational Therapist)	1947–49	Qualifies as an Occupational Therapist
	1948– 52	Works as Occupational Therapist in Christchurch and Dunedin
Marital status	1952	(32 yrs) Marries Bill Sewell in Wellington
	1954	First of three children born
Died	2000	

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

February 1938 was the first day of Audrey's kindergarten teacher training. Her excitement was palpable, as per the words she wrote in her diary – kept for over 60 years. Her words convey not only her excitement at the prospect of working with children, but also her passion for becoming a teacher.



First day at kindergarten – couldn't stay in bed any longer – up at 6.30 – fixed petticoat...and left far too early for Kind[ergarten]. Lovely morning – boat harbour very colourful...arrived too early!! ...met the other four students Marion Webster, Rosemary Jack and Jean Kemp, an awfully nice girl whom I would like to be friends. We observed! all the morning. Simply stunning work – awfully thrilled.... Got medically examined for a Teachers' Profession. I don't feel like a teacher – yet.

On day three, Audrey wrote she 'felt quite treacherous when a new little chap hailed me with a "good morning, teacher".'

Audrey Newton was a kindergarten teacher during an exciting period of change in early childhood education, with a big shift towards child-centred progressive education. Audrey was influenced by her family background to become a kindergarten teacher, and commenced her training at a time when reformist ideals were coming to the fore. After spending time teaching, she moved into the area of occupational therapy where she continued to promote her beliefs, experiences and holistic approach to care. Overall, Audrey's contribution to early childhood education in New Zealand was respected and her legacy remains.

Audrey was born in Wellington on September 27, 1920 to Howard and Grace Newton. The Newton's were a solid middle class family – Howard worked in the oil industry and Grace, as was fitting for these times, organised domestic and social activities. Living in Roseneath, Audrey was educated at Hataitai School and at the private Presbyterian girls' school, Queen Margaret College (QMC), where she excelled in the arts. Audrey graduated from QMC in 1937 and a year later entered kindergarten teaching training. Her decision was likely influenced by Miss Enid Wilson being a member of the QMC Board, as well as her mother's role as a Kindergarten Council member where she was involved in its fundraising and recruiting endeavours.

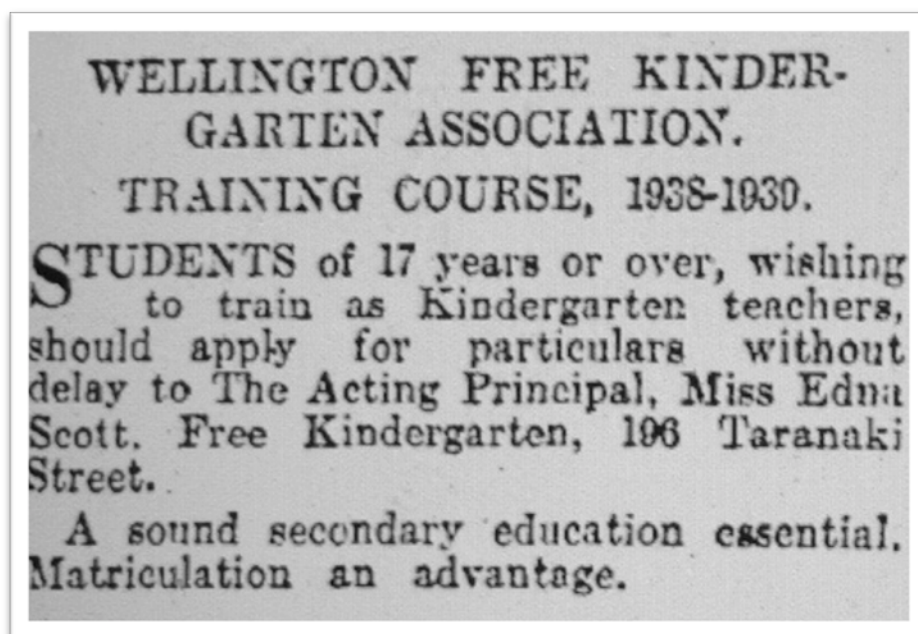


Figure 2 Student recruitment advertisement. Evening Post, 20 October, 1937, 2.
Wellington Free Kindergarten Association

Audrey was embarking upon an approved pathway for girls of her class and background. Kindergarten teaching was a fitting 'stop gap' between leaving school and marriage. Interestingly, parental approval was necessary to enter teacher training to ensure her father would financially support her for the two years of training and supplement her later meagre earnings as a teacher.

Audrey entered kindergarten teacher training in 1938 at the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA) in Taranaki Street. Audrey and her fellow students spent their days working in kindergartens in the mornings, and studying in the afternoon. In the mornings they assisted in one of six kindergartens that operated in the city and the afternoon study and lecture programme was where she was introduced to modern education ideas and the study of the psychology of the child.

Audrey was taught under Australian, Miss Enid Wilson, then Principal of the WFKA's training programme. Wilson was experienced in the study and application into practice of Montessori, Dewey and Isaacs' approaches to learning as well as that of Froebel. Moreover, she set out to modernise teacher training and the children's programme along progressive lines grounded in a knowledge base that included scientific child study. Prochner argues that Wilson, 'extended her greatest efforts on training a new cadre of teachers ... with a new reflective attitude toward child education, with the focus on individual children.'¹

After two years, and having fulfilled course requirements, Audrey graduated in a ceremony at the Banqueting Room at the Exhibition Buildings. Mrs Peter Fraser, wife of the then Minister of Education, presented the Kindergarten Teaching Diplomas.

Audrey was fortunate to gain her first position as Assistant Director at Wellington South Kindergarten. This was a new open-air kindergarten under the directorship of Miss Stewart Hamilton, herself trained under Wilson. Hamilton was freshly returned from overseas study with educational psychologist, Dr Susan Isaacs, and buzzing with new ideas.

¹ Larry Prochner, *A history of early childhood education in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*



Figure 3: Children building and painting a house made from packing case and reels. Wellington South Kindergarten 1940, Audrey Newton Collection, Private procession

As early as her second year as Assistant Director, Audrey was developing a reputation as a dedicated teacher who loved being with children - always 'getting [them] together through interest'ⁱ. One such project she designed aimed to build on children's interests and was stimulated by building activity next door to the kindergarten. The children's intense focus as they built and painted a house made from a large wooden packing case was captured in photographs.

Later teaching roles took Audrey to Ngaio and Berhampore kindergartens. And with growing numbers of students enrolling for kindergarten training in the early 1940s, Audrey was promoted to Assistant Director of kindergarten teacher training in 1943. Margaret Bennett, a student in 1945 describes the training programme:

We were lectured on so-called handwork, but that was creative work in itself- it was skills. We learnt about the value of jigsaw puzzles and the didactic material. We had development of the learning of reading and telling stories to be told to people, not read from a book. You knew the story and you showed it to the group and you had to highlight the learning of these stories so it wasn't just telling a story that children would like. We wrote down the things that we were going to ensure that the children could learn about. ... Also the facts of the ages of the children- we had tinies, middles and tops. Your work was geared to beginning children and as they progressed, to what was appropriate for those in the

middle group and those in the tops ready for moving on to school. So it was structured learning but it was creative at the same time.²

Miss Wilson expressed her faith in Audrey's capacity saying she 'brings many qualities to the position, despite her youth.' A year later, Miss Wilson reported 'the training work has been greatly facilitated by Miss Audrey Newton as Assistant Supervisor. Miss Newton has ably pioneered this new position. She is a young member of staff who shows great promise.'³

Loma Jones provides a student-teacher's perception of her work in teacher education.

...for me personally Audrey was a mentor of great importance in my life. She gave me faith in myself and taught me that I could be a very good kindergartener and I ended up being one of the top students of my year, which for me was a miracle. She was very loveable and loving, and in her lecturing she was incredibly encouraging always and got the best out of all of us as a result.⁴



Figure 4: Audrey's student teachers in Wellington c1943, Audrey Newton Collection

In 1946 Audrey opted for a career change and resigned from kindergarten teaching. Her decision to resign after eight years in kindergarten would have been a difficult one to make given her love of teaching, her loyalty to kindergarten in general and to Miss Wilson in particular.

² Interview Helen May with Margaret Bennett

³ Enid Wilson, Report for June 1943 MSX2527 -10, WFKA Council report Book 1936 -ATL

⁴ Interview Kerry Bethell with *Loma Jones*, 2002

For kindergarten, as for society itself, these were socially and politically turbulent years created through war and then into the post war era. As Miss Wilson pointed out they now faced 'the problems of peace'. Audrey may also have heard Labour Prime Minister, Mr Peter Fraser's concern to rehabilitate the returning soldiers; it being "our sacred duty to do everything possible within the resources of the country in an efficient and useful way to show that we have discharged our debt."⁵ This context sparked her venture into something new and these reasons contributed to something bigger that was emerging in Audrey's thinking. Furthermore, her brother Eric had returned home from war and she would have seen his psychological needs.

There was a demand for women to become occupational therapists, along with the recognition of the value of psychology in rehabilitation treatments. Occupational therapy would have also provided a salary sufficient to allow her to live more independently plus the opportunity to live away from the parental home. These push-pull factors underpinned her decision to end her work in kindergarten and to begin a second career as an occupational therapist.

Audrey applied for and was accepted as a diversional therapist at Timaru Public Hospital prior to her training in 1947 as an occupational therapist. She graduated in OT with honours in psychology.

Audrey carried her experiences of, and key beliefs about, kindergarten teaching into occupational therapy work, such as caring for children's holistic needs, responding to their emotions, building on their interests, and encouraging independence and creative play. Importantly, she recognised children as individuals with rights instead of passive objects of care and charity. For example, when working at Templeton Farm, Audrey used a selection in her work with 18 'mentally deficient' children in her care. In an article she wrote in 1950 for the *New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Audrey spoke of the children's "great need for affection ...and to belong".⁶

⁵ "A sacred duty" Disabled soldiers governments' pledge, *Evening Post*, 30 June 1943, 3.

⁶ Newton, A. Templeton Farm School. *The New Zealand Occupational Therapy Association Newsletter Journal*, vol 4. July, 1950, p. 3.

I have memories of myself biking from one class to the next, my bike laden like a junk shop... the boys waiting impatiently on the doorstep and seeing their faces light up and their eager rush to help as the bike rounded the corner – the sighs that went round when it was packing up time – the quiet hum of the children absolutely absorbed and happy (not forgetting the boisterous buzz at times) – little parcels wrapped in newspaper tied with wool left in my room as a surprise – their pathetic wanting to belong to someone outside and their great need for affection. ...It is in these things I remember which makes me realise that O.T. fills a very necessary part in the lives of these kiddies.⁷



Figure 5: Audrey as an occupational therapist on her way to class laden with resources. c1949, Audrey Newton Collection, Private procession

Audrey worked as an occupational therapist until her marriage to Bill Sewell in 1952 when, following prevailing social convention, she resigned. The couple lived in Karori, Wellington where they had three children. Audrey maintained her interest in children and teaching by involving herself in the Karori Playcentre. And in her long association with St Ninians church in Karori, Audrey undertook many roles including a Sunday school teacher.

Many of the activities she engaged in through her kindergarten work developed into life-long interests, such as piano playing, singing, water-colour painting and craft work of many kinds. She retained connections with Enid Wilson and Ted Scott who had provided and arranged flowers at her wedding and with her lifelong friend, Loma Jones – one of her kindergarten student teachers. Her

⁷ Ibid

loyalty to kindergarten evident also in her attendance at the Wellington Free Kindergarten Graduate Associate reunions.



Publications

Newton, A. Templeton Farm School. *The New Zealand Occupational Therapy Association Newsletter Journal*, vol 4. July, 1950, p. 3.

Publications– secondary sources

Bethell, K., & A Sewell, (2010) Researching an everyday teacher in 1940s New Zealand: New liaisons – new stories. *Journal of International Research in Early Childhood Education*. vol.1, No. 2, p13-28.

Sewell, A., & K Bethell, (2009) 'Building interests: A 1940s story of curriculum innovation and contemporary connections'. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work* , vol 6, No. 2, p. 93-110.

Sewell, A., & K Bethell, (in review) 'Sewing, knitting and weaving: Using objects to tell the story of the work of an occupation therapist in post World War 11 New Zealand. Submitted to *New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy*

Presentations

Bethell, K. & A. Sewell. (2010). *Finding Audrey's Story: A historical and sociocultural approach to researching the everyday work of teachers*. Paper presented at Australian Research Early Childhood Education Conference, Monash University Frankston, Melbourne. 19 – 21 January.

NZK bio links:

- Enid Wilson
- Edna (Ted) Scott
- Elizabeth Stewart Hamilton

