

## A KINDERGARTEN CAREER

In 1945 I graduated as a trained kindergarten teacher after two years of training. Now, in 2009, with a reunion approaching, I thought it appropriate to recall these training days and conditions. At 84 years of age, I realise that my time is running out, and there are very few students of that era still living. So for what it is worth, I will recall those days and conditions in the very different world of the 1940's.

Kindergartens and kindergarten teachers were not held in very high regard in those days. The previous generation felt they were not needed - children should be at home with the mothers. 'I didn't go to a kindergarten, and I turned out all right', was the prevailing attitude. Because teachers were very poorly paid, it was a 'nice job' for girls from rich families to fill in time until they were married. Nearly all students came from private schools. I think Lorna Jones (Hills) and I were the first students to come from Wellington and Wellington East Girls' Colleges. The fathers of most students had a professional background. I was made to feel my acceptance for training was rather doubtful - my father was a caretaker of a large building, and I was an only child, two factors which prompted a letter from the Association to say I would be accepted, but would be on trial for three months, despite having worked in a private kindergarten for a year.

There were few purpose-built kindergartens, most were in church halls, and everything had to be packed away each morning. Nothing could be left out, and it was extremely hard work physically. Northland staff had to put everything under a stage, and one crawled in and helped pull in the equipment.

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Haitaita<sup>1</sup> kindergarten was in the Realm Dance Hall. Ngaio, in the Methodist Church Hall. Miramar North was in the Tennis Pavilion - how the children loved racing to the furthest end of the courts and not heeding loud calls to 'come back'. Miramar Central was in a lodge hall until we moved to Mr Love's no-longer required joinery factory. With a few alterations it has been, and still is, a good kindergarten to work in. Petone and Hospital Road, Newtown, were nursery schools for some time, and Petone had a self-contained flat in the grounds. Miss Isabel Christison, newly arrived from England and Director of Petone, lived in the flat. Later, Miss Christison worked in the Pre-school Section of the Dept of Education, headed by Miss Moira Gallagher.

Miss Enid Wilson was the Principal of the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association, and as such set high standards for her staff and students. We had to be worthy of our 'high calling' and set a standard that would be respected. Miss Wilson was a vegetarian, and I can remember her looking at our lunches and making me feel very guilty if she found a meat sandwich! Our private life was also of great interest to Miss Wilson, and she talked to us about morals, our social life and dealings with the male (dare I say it!), sex. I am sure she would have liked us to bring our boyfriends for inspection, but we drew the line at that! At this time nearly all teachers were single. When I married in 1949, I was the first married teacher for many years.

Our training was held in the upstairs rooms of the Taranaki Street Nursery School, just around the corner from Abel Smith Street. It was a very old, inadequate, shaky building. The principal's office and training staff offices were also crammed into this space, which was freezing in the winter and most unsuitable for a large

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group, but we all coped with the building's limitations under the guidance of Miss Audrey Newton.

Our term was divided into two sections - 6 weeks practical experience in kindergartens - senior students out, junior students in, then we changed over. Afternoons were spent in lectures, psychology, kindergarten routines, history and development, (including Montessori methods), English literature, music, rhythm and movement with Madame Gisa Taglich, speech training and other relevant subjects, and visits to appropriate institutions. A visit to the Bethany Home for Unmarried Mothers was a warning and sobering experience! We went to carpentry at Wellington Technical College, and the skills I learned there have stood me in good stead in my later life. We had to make a piece of furniture for use in a kindergarten, eg doll's bed, bookcase, etc, then we were allowed to make something for personal use. The table I made has been a source of pride for many years. The instructor took a 'shine' to me and invited me to his flat to see his Kauri table (a novel departure from etchings!) For the record, I didn't go.

Our six weeks practical was a great learning experience, but very hard work. Each week we had to present a programme with a main theme - ships, farms, trains, etc, with all activities, songs and stories pinned on the wall for inspection. All students were expected to play the piano, or agree to learn during their training. I loved music, and would have become a music teacher as my second career choice, so music time was always a joy to me. I have a large collection of songs on every subject and movement, music for anything from trains to elephants.

My first section was spent at Wellington South with Director, Miss Joyce Page. Christine Bretherton (Ashcroft) and I worked extremely hard with the children and soon learned to mix paint, dough and set out indoor and outdoor equipment.

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There was no afternoon kindergarten in those days. The 3 year olds were 'Tinies', the 4 year olds 'Tops'. Sometimes the room was divided to accommodate the different age-groups. Playground time was not shared, and the timetable was strictly adhered to. I remember 'bathroom periods'. All your group (sometimes 20) were taken into the bathroom and sent to the toilet. Children sat on a mat and you entertained them with finger-plays, (I still used them with my grandchildren), picture talks, sense games, talks, etc. Full marks were awarded if you could get through this routine in 10 minutes! Morning tea was very formal - two housekeepers were chosen, aprons tied on (yes, the boys liked them too), and table-mats were set in place with a small vase of flowers to finish off the table. Usually Grace was sung, and apples passed around with 'thank you' and 'please may I leave the table' always expected. At about 11.30am small stretchers were put out, and the children covered with a blanket, rested until home time at 12.00 mid-day.

On Friday afternoons the student teachers stayed in their kindergartens for maintenance. Christine and I were given a long list of things to do before we were able to leave, and we were still there at 5.00pm after having polished all the chairs, scrubbed tables, checked and mended (if possible) indoor and outdoor equipment, cut painting paper, made paste and a dozen or so other tasks. I was so tired when I was having my dinner, I often fell asleep at the table!

We wore pale, blue long-sleeved uniforms with white buttons down the front. I think the material was provided and we were expected to make them to a standard pattern. Woe betide any student who turned up without her uniform. I often think of Miss Wilson in her tailored suit and severe, up-to-the-neck blouse - just as well there were no jeans in those days as the culprit would have been expelled on the spot!

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There was a kindergarten committee, comprising ~~of~~ well-to-do ladies who gave fund-raising afternoon tea parties. The students were expected to serve the tea, and wait on the 'crème de la crème' of Wellington society. I can remember being overwhelmed by the homes and furnishings of these ladies. Some were on The Terrace with beautiful gardens, long since destroyed for the motorway. I will always remember a visit to the Gibbons' home in Khandallah. Mr Gibbons would be waiting for us at the station and drive us up to "Boxhill" in his red convertible - a great thrill and experience into another world.

There were no restrictions of race, colour or creed in early kindergarten days, hence the word 'Free' in the title. Our Christmas programme was introduced over at least three weeks. ~~Finally~~ <sup>Firstly</sup>, the story of the Birth of Jesus, (usually introduced by going to a home to see a baby bathed), then the story of the shepherds and the wise men. The kindergarten displayed large Child Education pictures of the Manger Scene, Wise Men, etc, and the children made paper chains, streamers from the silver milk bottle tops, and presents for the parents were prepared. A wide range of Christmas songs and games were practised daily, and the excitement rose to fever pitch. During the last week a concert was presented sometimes at 6.00pm. This was often held in the neighbourhood hall and everyone from the M.P. for the district, local office holders, school teachers, grandparents and parents attended. It was a real 'event'. The children presented their items and then had a wonderful party while visitors enjoyed a luscious repast made by the mothers. It was a memorable end to the kindergarten year and established our important place in the community.

My first section as a senior student was at East Harbour, or Eastbourne as it is known today. I worked with Peggy Gibbons in a church hall where a private

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kindergarten had been held for some years. The children came from the numerous bays, starting at Point Howard, and all had labels attached showing their destination - the poor bus driver - it was a miracle he didn't lose someone.

For the first time a student allowance of 10/- a week was granted by the Education Department. I travelled to Eastbourne on the bus and usually came home on the ferry (cost 7/6 a week). Because of the travelling cost I wrote to the Association saying my grant dwindled to 2/6. I was granted a travelling allowance of 5/-, the first student to receive one.

On my last section I was sent to the nursery school in Taranaki Street. The Director was Miss Ted Scott who had been there for decades, and ruled with an iron hand. Ted Scott lived in Brooklyn with Miss Wilson and had quite an influence on the students she 'chose' to work with her. I was given a group of near 5 year olds and we were housed in a brick building in the playground away from the main classes. What a challenge those children were! Most had been at the nursery school for almost 2-1/2 years, and they were bored and restless, and fair game for a young student. Miss Scott could bring them to order with one glance - I didn't have that talent. I asked Miss Scott if I would be allowed to take them 'walkabouts', and she readily agreed. Imagine being allowed to take 12 children out with 1 adult in today's world! Nevertheless we had a wonderful time. We explored the Milk Dept in Tory Street, and took apples to feed the horses. We visited Bryant & Mays match-making factory, the wharves, the fire station, and best of all, my home - on top of a ten-storey building in Courtenay Place. The children loved a ride in the goods lift, and my father always had a chocolate fish on hand for each child.

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One memorable day we went on board Admiral Byrd's ship which had returned from the Antarctic. The crew treated us royally and showed us the penguins and pictures of icebergs, and sent us back laden with candy bars. (The teacher was asked for a few dates too!) I also took two Chinese children home to Haining Street (a rather low-class area populated by 'mysterious' goings on). I always hoped someone would come to the front door and claim the children, but I had to take them to the back door where sometimes opium smokers were puffing their pipes. I never came to any harm, but was always relieved to pick my way across the drugged bodies on the verandah.

When Miss Ted Scott retired from the nursery school, Miss Joyce Barns became Director. Later Miss Barns held the position of principal of the Kindergarten Teachers' College for many years. I valued her friendship, and we travelled overseas together many times.

I had planned carefully for my final exam, and chose fire engines and firemen for my theme. I knew a fireman and he lent me a uniform, complete with axe and brass helmet, which I hung on the door. I had a model fire engine, complete with tank of water to fill the hose and many other exciting things - far too stimulating and overwhelming for my unruly group! I was trying to quell the excitement when Miss Wilson walked in. I decided the only course of action was to play fire engines in the playground, so out we went with sirens erupting from each child. To my horror, I saw my feared 'tearaways' with the fireman's axe attacking the jungle gym. I ran to recover the axe and my nose started to bleed uncontrollably. I rescued the axe, and Miss Wilson ran for Miss Scott. I was sent to lie down and accept my fate - 2 years training had met with a disastrous failure, however that didn't happen, and I passed with honours. How proud I was when my kindergarten brooch was pinned on

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my dress. It depicted a child building blocks and inscribed around the edge with "He who helps a child helps humanity". I am sure that phrase went out of existence a few years later!

My first posting was a great surprise. I was appointed Director at Ngaio kindergarten. It was a challenge and rather frightening beginning to my career - from student to Director. I looked forward to 1946 with some trepidation, but the parents were wonderful and very supportive, the children were a delight, although we worked very hard to make a church hall into a kindergarten. I loved my two years spent at Ngaio. Firm friendships were established and lasted for many years. In those days a child had to be visited in his or her home before coming to kindergarten. This visit happened during an afternoon, and it was a valuable help in getting to know the family and child's background.

We had a thriving Mothers' Club meeting once a month, and a local committee responsible for the finances, fundraising, etc. Both of these I had to attend and the local committee expected a report on the month's activities. Voluntary donations were a routine part of kindergarten, and on a Friday a small envelope was pinned to the child's clothing with a receipt for the last week's donation. This envelope was returned on Monday with anything from 1/- to 2/6 inside. The Director kept an account of all donations and handed these to the local committee. No child was excluded if parents could not pay. I wonder how many of those little envelopes would reach the kindergarten safely in today's world.

Every year there was a talent quest held at Berhampore kindergarten. Every Mothers' Club presented an item, and it was amazing to see the high standard of items and individual performers. One of the Ngaio mothers, an Australian, had sung in J C Williamson's wonderful productions and produced a top-class performance.



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The costumes and sets were amazing - something that busy working modern mothers could not have time for in today's demanding lifestyle.

I was transferred to Miramar kindergarten for a year and then became Supervisor of Student Training - a position I really enjoyed.

I was married in 1949 and put my career on hold when our family arrived. Later, I was to return to kindergarten teaching in a different capacity - working with disabled or special needs pre-school children. This became my passion for 25 years. I developed new skills in a relatively unknown field, and my appointment as Pre-School Officer for the New Zealand Crippled Children Society, saw kindergartens established in many North Island centres. My pride and joy was the pre-school, (named after Sir Alexander Gillies, a keen supporter of my ideas), built in the grounds of Waiwhetu School in Lower Hutt. Here, a dedicated staff with teacher-child ratio of 5 children to 1 teacher, worked closely with the infant mistress to enable new entrants to settle into school life and routine - a week of learning to hold a pencil, achieve the completion of a puzzle or a piece of handwork, and to sit quietly listening to a story.

I am very proud to look back over the years and developments made. The establishment of the first mobile kindergarten in New Zealand, the awareness of the needs of disabled and handicapped children, paved the way for integration into 'normal' kindergartens. With other enthusiastic teachers we established a Toy Library for special needs children. This developed into the excellent, well-run libraries found throughout New Zealand.

After retiring in 1985 I worked for some time as a relieving teacher in numerous kindergartens. It was a great joy to 'keep my hand in', and catch up with modern trends.

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I still think I chose the best career anyone could have, and feel very proud to tell people 'I was a kindergarten teacher'.

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