

State Preschool Education 1972-2006: Children's Memories of Preschool

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Debbie Gahan graduated from BKTC in 1975 and taught in a range of Kindergarten, Preschool and Child Care settings in Qld and the ACT. She has been a lecturer in the School of Early Childhood at QUT (formerly BCAE) for 21 years, teaching primarily in the areas of kindergarten/ preschool curriculum and practices, family studies and the history of early childhood education in Australia. Debbie was president of the Early Childhood Teachers Association for eight years in the 1990s, and maintains strong links with practitioners in the early childhood field in Queensland. Since 1995, Debbie has been a Moderator in the National Child Care Accreditation Scheme. She was also, until its recent closure, the academic coordinator of the Gerald Ashby Family Centre on the campus of QUT, Kelvin Grove.

Debbie currently works with Sue Thomas at Kelvin Grove Junior College Prep one day per week to keep in touch with young children and parents and have first-hand experience of the new Early Years Curriculum in Queensland. This also allows her to liaise more effectively with QUT Early Childhood students who come to observe at Kelvin Grove Prep. She is the author of the book *Debutantes to the Ball: Chiselhurst Preschool & Kindergarten: 60 Years of History and Recollections* published in 2002. Her recently completed doctoral thesis explored childhood and teacher memories of kindergarten in Queensland from 40-50 years ago.

Preschool has been an important part of the lives of thousands of children and parents throughout Queensland over the three decades since it began in 1972. The local state preschool has been a fixture in metropolitan and rural communities across the state, and perhaps it was taken for granted that it would always be there - alongside the local state school. As Preschool continues to serve children and families in its final year of operation, it is fitting to consider its impact on those who became part of a preschool community - particularly those who attended as children. This reflection on Preschool Education in Queensland (following earlier articles by Gail Halliwell and Rosemary Perry) provides an opportunity to recount some memories of preschool from those who were at the heart of each centre - the children. While it is only possible to capture a smattering of these childhood stories, they provide a fascinating window into what was important, and therefore memorable, about the experience of preschool for some children. They also highlight what lasts in the memory and can be reconstructed and relived twenty or so years later. It is also timely to consider how these childhood perspectives may help to inform approaches taken in Prep as it replaces Preschool in 2007.

Remember

What *do* people remember when they think back to their childhood years at preschool? Why do some

memories seem more immediate and powerful than others? My doctoral thesis - an historical study which examined childhood memories of Queensland kindergartens from 40-50 years ago - certainly attests to the power of certain childhood experiences. As I documented childhood recollections and perspectives on life at kindergarten, several themes emerged across decades and settings. It is clear, for example, that children's senses are highly attuned to the environments that surround them as children. Sensory memories - smell, sights and sounds of environments - are among the most resilient and evocative.

Current neuroscience research confirms and helps to explain this. Rushton (2001), for example, notes that *As children interact with their learning environment...they assimilate large amounts of information through their senses* (p.71). In my study, many people could describe in detail the indoor, and even more particularly the outdoor environments, of their kindergarten from decades earlier - and were remarkably accurate in their recall. Strong emotional responses also coloured their recollections of play episodes, games with friends, routines and the fairness or unfairness displayed by adults in response to particular situations. This is again not surprising as contemporary brain research indicates that *all information [children take in] is sent*



Teacher Stories

to the amygdale in the lower brain, which sorts it for emotional significance (Rushton, 2001, p.71).

Childhood memories of preschool from the 1970s, 80s, 90s, display this same awareness of and emotional responses to the environment, to play activities and to the roles played by teachers. Here are just a few snapshots of preschool life from a variety of Queensland centres and from a variety of childhood memories and viewpoints:

Environments

Nick remembered most vividly: *Sliding down a slippery tarpaulin set up by my preschool teacher, Mr S. He would attach one end to the sandpit and one to the fence at the top of the grassy hill in the preschool playground and have the hose running down the tarp for us to slide down. Shrieks of laughter and racing back up to do it again. There was also a "pool" up the back of the preschool which was basically a depression in the grass. It had been concreted and filled in with small rocks. Mr. S would fill it up with water and we would play in it. It was very slippery and in hindsight, very uncomfortable on our feet, but I remember having a lot of fun there on hot days. I think this and sliding down the slippery tarp were my two favorite activities at preschool. We would always eat lunch and morning tea out in the sun on the grass also which I really enjoyed*

Alex: *I remember there was an old tree stump in the playground. It looked frightening and there was a story that it was haunted.*

Cecelia: *I remember having fun playing in the rainforest garden at preschool.*

Thomas also remembered the rainforest at preschool and the sense of adventure that children felt when they went into that area of the playground. A camp-out and possum-spotting night at preschool was a highlight.

Kyle: *The trikes that we could ride around outside and the great big sandpit. There was a kind of circular track in the playground and we loved to go like mad and race each other around the track, although we weren't supposed to. There was a real feeling of freedom. I remember lots of us happily playing in the sandpit, digging holes and making cakes and castles...*

Emma: *The tyre swing at preschool and the fact that it required the cooperative effort of friends working together to push it.*

Rituals

Chris: *We would always eat lunch and morning tea out in the sun on the grass. I loved that.*

Laura remembered getting the beds out for rest time each day as an independent and enjoyable activity for children and the sense of security she felt in having her own bunny sheets on her bed at preschool (also recalled by numbers of people in my historical study).

Emma recalled getting out the mats for morning tea and having your own little mat that defined your personal space at morning tea.

Novel Events

Nicholas: *The preschool teacher held a miniature "Olympics" where we had running races, hurdle races (the hurdles were large toilet roles stuck together and held up with sticky-tape), egg races etc.*

Cecelia: *I remember having sports days, where we would have potato sack races, three legged races and egg and spoon races.*

Caitlin remembered she was fascinated by ... the hidden places in the preschool, the places where only the adults were allowed to go, like the teacher's office, and the dark secret area upstairs.

There is evidence that children experience strong feelings about things that may seem trivial to us as adults. For example, Jonathon recalled twenty years later: *We each had a "locker" at preschool where we could put our bags at the beginning of the day. Each locker had a picture on it to identify whose locker it was. I had the 'chair' picture on my locker, and I remember being somewhat disappointed with the lack of manliness of this.*

Children's memories of play and the opportunities they had to try out ideas and to imagine.

As Sam said: *I remember playing with blocks and building castles. The blocks were very large, from memory (about 20-30 cm in length, big for a preschooler!) but they allowed you to try out ideas and gain a lot of satisfaction in creating structures. There was a very large PVC mat that had the outline of a road on it. There were pictures of buildings, zebra crossings, schools, hospitals. The main drawcard of this was that we would get matchbox cars and "drive" them around the map stopping at various locations to drop someone at hospital or take the kids to school or fill up with petrol.*

Lindsay: *I remember playing rock and roll concerts at preschool. Mr S would set up large blocks to make a stage and put on a rock music tape for us to sing and dance to. We would use a block for a microphone ...*

Alex: *I have happy memories of building things like spaceships out of the big and little wooden boxes with my preschool friend Phillippe. I also remember*

sitting in a circle in the morning and talking about all sorts of things.

Cecelia: *I liked playing doctors and nurses in home corner. I remember painting with our fingers and having quiet time, where we would have to set up our beds. I also remember Miss T playing the piano for us.*

Concerns and Frustrations

Catherine: *We had to play a repetition game everyday before we could break for the toilet and morning tea. The teacher would clap some blocks together in a pattern, and then we had to go around the circle and repeat it by clapping. Once you got it right, you were allowed to go. If you got it wrong, you had to wait for it to come around to your turn again. I always got it wrong! I really did not enjoy that game and I don't think it did much for my self esteem either.*

Emily: *I dreaded nap time during the day, because I never, never wanted to take a nap. I wasn't punished for that, but if you didn't want to nap, you had to be very quiet and I wasn't big on that either!*

(Rest time, I might add, has been the bane of many children's lives at kindergarten/preschool, if memories are anything to go by!)

What messages are there for us in these memories?

Embedded in these memories are interests, concerns and emotions that, to me, speak about what is important to children across eras and contexts - but what do we do about this? Some clues may be gained from insightful writers on early childhood. The terms they use may differ, but their perspectives and purposes are remarkably similar. They point to the need for early childhood teachers to:

- Develop "child-sense" as well as "teacher-sense" through listening to children, take their thoughts seriously, creating environments with children and responding to their interests and ideas. (Kennedy & Surman, 2006)
- Ensure that children's "main subjects" of interest, imagination and concern become a significant part of a playful early childhood curriculum (Paley, 1996).
- Remember that what appears trivial & forgettable to adults ("Little Trials of Childhood" as Frances Waksler calls them) can often become a key childhood memory.

As Vivian Paley (1996) suggests: *We have to accept that children have a lot more in common with each*

other than they have with us as teachers ... but unless we really listen to and observe children, a lot remains secret and their main subjects of imagination, interest and concern may not get into the curriculum (p. 63). Kennedy & Surman (2006) similarly discuss the idea of a "Pedagogy of Relationships" which involves really listening to the ideas and viewpoints of each child and helping children to listen to each others' ideas and viewpoints so that they can hear and potentially incorporate new perspectives into their learning. It is interesting to reflect that this was also a tenet of the Event-Based Philosophy which had such an impact on teachers' thinking about curriculum in many state preschools from the 1980s (as noted also by Rosemary Perry in her earlier article on Queensland Preschools in the Spring 2006 edition of this journal). Finally, it is important to remember that, as Lillian Katz (1995/96, p.72) asserts: ... *the important ultimate effects of a program depend primarily on how it is viewed from below; that is how the program is subjectively experienced by each child. This bottom-up perspective ... requires answers to the central question "What does it feel like to be a child in this environment?"*

What did it feel like to you? Do you have a memory of preschool or kindergarten, as a child, parent, teacher or aide? If so, I would be delighted to incorporate your recollections into a more extensive paper on memories of experiences in Australian early childhood settings.

Please email me at <d.gahan@qut.edu.au>.

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