

IN THE WORDS OF MARY PURDY (1933-2022)

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I interviewed Mary in 1994 for the book, *Teachers Talk Teaching: Early Childhood, School, Teacher's College*, Dunmore Press 1997 (with Sue Middleton). I have extracted a few of Mary's words from her interview, including some from *Teachers Talk Teaching*. I will edit Mary's full interview for her family.

I first met Mary Purdy in 1979 when she was the Director of the kindergarten programme at Wellington Teachers College. I was a new supervisor of the Victoria University Creche and was invited to a meeting of the Wellington Preschool Association. I met a group of amazing women from different early childhood organisations including the Department of Education, who were plotting and planning for the revolution that needed to happen in early childhood education. The group included, Marie Bell, Beverley Morris who convened the group, Pam Cubey, Geraldine McDonald, Val Burns, a young Lynne Bruce and Anne Meade. I have written the story of this group:

‘Networking at the Wellington preschool ‘Sunday Club’, (Eds.) S. Middleton & H. May, *For Women and Children: A Tribute to Geraldine McDonald*, Wellington, NZCER Press, 2019, pp. 100-110.

Later in 1979 or perhaps 1980 I was selected to attend a one week course led by Mary at Lopdell House run by the Dept of Education on working with parents in early childhood,. It was amazing and I learnt so much. The course was also very convivial compared to the seriousness of the Sunday club. I recall Mary dancing on a table one night!

Mary was a great support when I took up the position of Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Institute of Early Childhood Studies, established jointly by Victoria University and the Wellington College of Education in 1995. A fond memory is a ‘ladies’ morning tea held at the Institute in honour of Joyce Barns whose family had gifted us an oil painting which nowadays is carefully tended by Professor Carmen Dalli who, with Tony Holmes, was instrumental in getting the Institute established. Besides the Institute staff, Carmen, Sophie Alcock and myself, the guests include Beryl Hughes [kindergarten historian], Marie Bell, Anne Meade, and Mary Wood. In Mary's interview she pays tribute to Joyce Barns



L to R

Sophie Alcock, Mary Wood, Marie Bell, Beryl Hughes, Mary Purdie, Helen May, unknown, Carmen Dalli,
(in front) Anne Meade, Institute of Early Childhood Studies, Murphy Building, VUW, c. 2003

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The idea of kindergarten teaching:

My mother had been on a kindergarten committee. She was also on the Plunket Committee and those sorts of things. I got interested in kindergarten and remember going to see the Head Mistress, with my mother, and the Head Mistress said, "I think Mary would be a good teacher", and my mother said, "She's a bossy enough without being a teacher." It was decided I would have the opportunity of being an untrained teacher for a year in Hamilton, to see if I liked it or not...

I didn't know, till many years later, that my parents were bitterly disappointed that I didn't go to university and when I chose early childhood teaching, they were even more disgruntled, because they could see no career pattern. But they had to bite their words because it has been very good to me.

Kindergarten training c. 1950

Myers Park in Auckland was a great place. The training had a lot to recommend it although there were still lots of things that were pretty awful, like learning how to put lids on paint pots, and there was a lot of making of equipment - I made an interlocking train. When you think of the hours it would take when I could have been doing child development, but we did have a good basic training. There was a lot of creative art but the child development didn't have the depth, it just skimmed across the surface really. If you were going to learn anymore you had to do something else.

Mentors

I can remember Moira Gallagher {The Department of Education's Preschool Officer} coming to visit me, and she must have seen my face when she walked in and said, "forget about me being here, I'll be one of your staff members." We were not allowed to wear trousers and she said, "You can't possibly work in skirts in this condition. I give you permission to wear corduroy trousers, provided they match. I will talk to the Committee". She also said, "Come and have dinner with me at the hotel tonight, and I'll talk about what you want to do". She made me believe that I could have a career in early childhood and suggested that I go to university. Unfortunately, I mucked about, I had a good year, and I didn't pass. I sat next to Max Cryer and he drew dress designs for us. The next year Moira said to me, "Why don't you go and talk to Lex Grey." He let me do his playcentre lectures on child development. Even though I was an unmarried person with no children I joined in his playcentre training and that really inspired me. It was just wonderful though he and I had lots of arguments and some differences, like allowing children to have their milk on the gate post if they wanted to. There were limits we disagreed about. Lex argued that "The child has to learn by experiencing things." I remember one time he even talked about children crossing the road on their own and I couldn't agree, but he might have been testing me. I often stayed behind to talk with him afterwards. He was inspirational.

Introducing free play in kindergarten in Auckland 1950s:

Well, that first year we thought free play was just letting the children do what they wanted, literally. I had an incredibly free – programme - probably far too free when I think back, but it was much freer than anybody else was operating at that time in Auckland. One teacher I had working for me thought I was just crazy and asked the Association for a transfer.

We put everything out for the children to play with. We didn't really know how to handle it. We even became authoritarian when we wanted to intervene. I can remember sending children to the office, who weren't fitting into what I thought was the right pattern of play! We didn't really understand children's behaviour enough to know what we should be doing. I also tried to do away with the mat time. That created an incredible upset.

Teaching in Wellington, 1957-1961

Moir encouraged me to shift to Wellington. I liked some of the things that were happening in kindergarten in Wellington. I felt I had the opportunity to do lots of reading. I hadn't been in Wellington very long when Joyce Barns (from the Kindergarten College) rang and said she needed another lecturer. I was about 25 or 26 years. There was no such thing as applying for the job. Their committee came and watched me work in the kindergarten and interviewed me. In 1958 I went into the Taranaki Street College to lecture mainly in a course they called 'principles and practices', and to visit students on their teaching experience. It was really hard work. The conditions were appalling when I look back. We were in a very old building, and Taranaki St was a terrible end of town then. However, I learnt a hell of a lot. There was far more emphasis on child development, with people like Marie Bell at the College. That was an inspiration. Finding Marie was one of the turning points in the training. Then Gwen Somerset came into the College too so we had some good people. It was quite inspiring. I left in 1961 to have my first daughter. My husband Barry had a son of 8 years, and we wanted to fill the gap quickly, and according to everybody I was getting very old, I mean I was only 29! Sarah was born in 1961, Belinda was born in 1962 and Joe was born in 1964

Kindergarten on the Air and a working mother

Just before I was married, I had had a party at the flat the night before, and the phone rang the next morning and this voice said, "Miss Brooker, we would like you to come and audition for "kindergarten of the air". I thought it was the guys from the party the night before. This voice said, "I'm serious Miss Brooker." They wanted me to sing and write a script. I said there was no point because I can't sing in tune. They insisted so I went down to this vast studio, and somebody played the piano and I sang Baa Baa Black Sheep and Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, and read my script. Keith Hay said to me as we walked out, "You're quite right Miss Brooker you can't sing a note in tune"! So, they got Alice Martin to sing and play the piano and offered me the job. Well of course it was wonderful.

The scripts were overseen by a man, who used to be in the air force, and he should have stayed there. They did limit me a bit. I wasn't allowed to use long words. One time we had the song *Miss Polly had a dolly* on the programme and the Minister of Health rang the Minister of Broadcasting and said to get that song off the radio smartly because it mentioned the pill!

I in some ways felt I was nowhere near suited. I was young and I wanted the money, because I had Sarah and Belinda while I was doing this. It was a wonderful job for a young family, and it was a good income. I would write the scripts while they were asleep, then rehearse them and record them at night.

We were there to educate. I had Beverley Morris on the advisory committee and that helped tremendously. She also encouraged me. That was a wonderful experience. The fan mail was a terrible burden because it came from the sailors on the ship, saying can we have the jumping game once more! All sorts of people wrote to you. The programme was on at 8.40 in the morning when people were driving to work and they would hear it. I went to a conference with

my husband once and they asked me to do a session at breakfast. Somebody leaned over to Barry and said, "Do you know she is almost as good as the person who does it on the radio"! I did the programme under my maiden name of Brooker so nobody really knew who it was.

My husband was supportive and absolutely marvelous. When I was first at home with the children, he insisted on having somebody come in once a fortnight for four hours. Not to do any housework or anything, just to look after the children for me to go out and have a cup of coffee somewhere or go to a museum. We couldn't really afford it but, he was very supportive.

Joining Playcentre

Joe was four before I went back to the college. In the meantime, I finished Kindergarten on the Air. They said they didn't want me any longer, which was quite a blow to one's ego. Kate Harcourt came after me. She was an actress not a kindergarten teacher and had a better speaking voice. I was sort of left with nothing to do. Well, I had three children under three! So, I slipped back into Playcentre when Jonathan was about 2 and became very involved. We lived in Khandallah on the road to the shops and the house was equipped for children and there were always children there. The day that Joyce Barns rang me to ask if I would I come back to Kindergarten College, I'd had 23 uninvited children through the house, so I said yes - willingly. The playcentre filled a gap at that time. I was always involved in early childhood - I was so lucky.

Kindergarten College 1967

Joyce said would I do 8 hours a week, and that soon became 15 hours. Then there was a fulltime job and Barry said, "why don't you apply for it, you're doing those hours anyway." Joe had started school by then, but I still needed good backup services at home as I didn't have family in Wellington. It was important that there was always somebody having to go home to.

There were a lot of people who frowned upon what I was doing and saw Barry as having a decent job so why did I have to go out to work? It never entered their head that it might be for me that I was doing it. This was hard, particularly living in a suburb like Khandallah. I found it quite difficult, dealing with people's feeling about my about working with young children. Now of course it is quite different.

Joining the Teachers College 1974

We were running a good programme at the College with good people involved. Suddenly in 1973 we were told we going to join primary at the teacher's college. We got a letter in the mail which said our services were no longer required and from 31 January, but you may apply for a job on the open market. This was done without any negotiation. Joyce Barns retired at that stage and was very hurt by it. While I think it was the right thing to do educationally for training it was terrible the way it was done. Some of us won jobs at the teacher's college and some didn't. It was absolutely awful. I don't think really knew what early childhood training was about at the teacher's college. Those first years were battles really. A lot of the time they thought, "Oh well, that was a group of women that ran it that way, and now in the big wide world and they will have to learn to do things properly." That was the attitude to us. For those first few years it was survival, and we just got along and got on with it. Pam Cubey joined the

staff and that was one of the best things that ever happened. Pam had a very good academic background and a was deep thinker. She was really inspirational. Around 1981 I became the Director.

I never ever envisaged I would have such a long career in early childhood. If I am honest, I should have got out 15 years ago and done something else, and I regret that I didn't in some ways. But I still get absolutely fired up about early childhood and still think it was one of the best things I did. I was very disappointed when neither of my daughters took it up. One daughter her own portable sawmill. she couldn't have gone any further from early childhood. But then at age 24 my son decided to do early childhood training in the childcare course with Helen Bernstone. It was quite exciting that he took it up, even in this day and age he is absolutely convinced that is what he wants to do.

Mary's career in early childhood continued for many years after this.

