Edited interview with Miss Isobel Christison by Helen May in 1994, for the book: *Teachers Talk Teaching: Early childhood primary and teachers' college,* by Sue Middleton and Helen May, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1997.

H: I would like to start with asking how you first got into early child education?

I: Sheer fluke. I wanted to be a teacher. Teaching was in the family. In my childhood it was the women went into offices, or they were nurses, or they were teachers. Well, it was teaching for me. I had an academically brilliant older sister who was a teacher, and who won open scholarships to Oxford and all this sort of thing. I wasn't in that league at all. I had a school friend, older than I, who had started nursery school teacher training, and she said, 'Its wonderful, you just play with the children". I thought, that's for me!

H: Can I ask when you were born?

I: I was born in 1920 in England and this decision to go teaching happened in 1939 just at the outbreak of the War. Having made a choice, all the other choices are closed off to you and that's where I stuck, with young children. Though training to work with young children in my time in England they were children between 2 and 11 years. This was teacher training with special qualification in nursery work.

H: And so where did you train?

I: The Rachel McMillan Training College

H: Oh, I visited that earlier this year. I saw the building in Deptford, London. It was looking a very sorry sight.

I: I never saw the actual college. This was 1939, and the college was evacuated to its country house near Tunbridge and then to another house in Tunbridge itself. That's where I did my training.

H: Describe to me the Rachel McMillan Training at that stage.

I: I think it was very poor training, frankly. I hadn't much idea what to do with the children, except there was an attitude to children taught. "Caught rather than taught". You cottoned onto the

idea that children were sensible, intelligent, important, and they weren't quite babies. That I think was about the most valuable thing I learnt. But as for practice, it was awfully difficult because our practice with children under-five was automatically with children evacuated from their homes, separated from their parents. They were very difficult to manage, and for a young student it was quite frightening to have to deal with children who had tantrums or were persistent bed wetters. I didn't really know what to do. I did it by feel. The turning point came when I met a child whose name was Ann, who was 'at the bottom' of everything. If there was a fight going on Ann was at the bottom. If the cupboard had been turned on its side and all the equipment was on the floor Ann had done it. I really got to breaking point, and I really couldn't express anger to her. I was too unhappy myself. I put my arms around her and said, "Oh, Ann, what now?" She burst into tears, and I think I probably burst into tears; and it was suddenly a feeling that this was a little girl who needed attention, rather than somebody wicked who was out there to try me. After that I found my way towards enjoying children for themselves; and then all the other difficulties fell into place. I didn't get it through my training. I got a very good training in, of all things, nutrition and cooking, because of the children being there 24 hrs. a day, all their lives. It was a residential school. We had to prepare the food and this was in wartime with rationing. The idea was that you couldn't superintend a nursery school cook until you could do it yourself. We had excellent training in nutrition that has stood me in good stead to this day. I got very good training in story telling, and I got some clues about how children acquire literacy and numeracy from that early childhood experience. But apart from that I don't think it was very good training at all. I think most of the child development I learned I learnt in New Zealand. Lots of it from the Playcentre movement, whose parent education work was extremely good. But I think it was that experience of living with the children for all those years that illuminated what I was learning from child development in New Zealand. That's where it came from, not from a training in England at all. One thing at the time was the dearth of textbook and libraries. We just didn't have them.

H: What happened after that?

I: After my training, because our home destroyed during the war, I went to work in residential nursery schools, which I enjoyed. No young woman wants to work in an institution, and it was very hard work. Our normal hours of duty were 70 hours a week. We worked from 7 in the morning to 7 at night, and one day a week you were on until 9.30 or 10.00 I think it was, until the night staff came on. Then at the end of the war, the London County Council, for whom I was working, began to consolidate their education services to cater for the children who were going home, and for the

children who were not going home for some reason or another. It was then that a friend of mine and I decided that since the sky was bluer and the sun was warmer on the other side of the world, we would go somewhere else.

H: That was a brave thing to do.

I: It was kind of foolhardy when I think about it, but there it was. We decided we'd like to go somewhere else, and New Zealand sounded great. We went to various embassies around London saying, “What's the chance of coming here, there, and everywhere?” In Canada we had to pay the fare. We hadn't got the money so that was it. And we didn't really think about Australia, I don't know why notBut New Zealand House gave us cups of tea and gave us books to look at. I said, ‘But how do I get a job?’ And they said, 'Oh well write to the Dept. of Education in Wellington', and they gave me the address. I wrote and said, “here am I, I'm a nursery school teacher, these are my qualifications, and what I'd done. Have you got a job?” For some reason my letter was passed on to the Wellington Kindergarten Association; and the Wellington Association said, "We need extra teacher, come at once".

H: What year was that?

I: 1947-1948. I wrote back and said, “Well, thanks, I would love to, but I wouldn't come unless I knew I had somewhere to live.” They wrote back and said, “We've got one kindergarten that's got a little flat attached to it, you can have that". I wrote back and said, "Oh, good, thank you so much, can you help me with my fare". That was just pushing my luck. And they wrote back and said, "Well we can get you on the immigration scheme for £10". So I came. it. I left England at the end of 1948 and arrived on January 13th 1949.

H: To the Wellington Kindergarten Association?

I: The Petone Kindergarten.

H: Tell me what you found out here in terms of kindergarten work?

I: I was delighted and surprised. Well, for one thing, if you said to the children, “Sit down and be quiet”, they sat down and they were quiet. I couldn't believe that. I'd never had children who did

that before. The building was delightful, and there were only 40 children. I had been used to places of well over 40, some over 100 children, with a much bigger staff. This was my own little cell, so to speak. I was working with one assistant and some students; and we talked and laughed, and I enjoyed it very much. Although people talked about the dearth of equipment, I didn't find it that way. To me they were very well equipped, after England in the war where you could get nothing whatsoever. I was a bit puzzled, but after a little time, I welcomed the presence of mothers around the place. I didn't quite know what they were doing at first. My greatest surprise was when I discovered how badly I had transgressed all the unwritten rules, because I didn't wear stockings, and I didn't wear an overall; and I had not run the sort of programme that was conventional at that time. I was doing something quite different, and I wasn't doing what I was told enough. It quite surprised me that anyone thought that I ought to be obeying the rules.

H: What as the conventional programme? Describe it to me. Describe what you were supposed to be doing?

I: Well there were two play rooms, but you had three groups of children. You had tiny's, middles and tops. And somebody was responsible for each. Because you only had two play rooms you had to do a highly sophisticated and complicated run around with the playground, and the toilet block, so that you'd always got the children separated in their business. It was so complicated and so clever to get them all in the right place where they were.

H: How did the toilet block fit into it?

I: Well, you had a set morning tea. Before the children had morning tea they all had to go into the toilet whether they wanted to or not, and wash their hands afterwards, and come back and sit down. To get, what was it, 20 or 15 children through the toilet when you had ex number of toilet bowls and wash basins was a master piece of efficiency. The other thing was the playground, you see, you were only out there until such time as the next group of children came.

H: So it was a roster kind of rotating system?

I: Yes, it was a rotating system. I've forgotten who did what, where, but one started having play outside when the others were inside, and then they all moved round. That was conventional. It was very good in one or two ways. Every child got a crack at a story time, a music time, or a games

times, or whatever. With the toilet, although I laugh, it really did instill easy habits of hygiene with the children which was so automatic that you didn't have the worry. It did have its virtues but it wasn't really what the children wanted to do.

H: What was the programme that they were actually doing in the play rooms. How much choice was there for children in that?

I: Fair amount. There was heavy emphasis on manipulative play material, but there was also painting, dough; not finger painting or clay that I really remember, or it might have been brought out by a student for a special demonstration. Blocks. There was dressing-up in the dolls corner always; but there was a fair amount of choice. Yet I do think the children were directed. "Johnny, you played with the blocks yesterday, so its Harry's turn today".

H:
What about craft or art activities?

I:
I think it was organised much in the same way, "Betty, you did the painting, so you'll let someone else do it today". They had some craft activities which seemed to me not really very creative, like making sand saucers with flowers in them, and that sort of thing, which might have been a bit pretty but they weren't really doing anything very much. There was quite a lot of stuff on 'a nice thing to take home for Mummy'. Cutting and pasting I remember, but what they cut and paste I can't quite remember.

H: What kind of children were going to the kindergarten? Where were they coming from?

I: They were coming from Petone entirely; and at that time we had no Maori children, no Pacific Island children of course. We had one Chinese child. But the rest of them were a great old mixture. I would think most of the children could be described as middle middle-class.

H: They weren't the ‘waifs and strays’ of an earlier generation?

I: Oh, no way. Neither were they the children of professional people. I think we had the children of one Doctor, but that was all. They were builders, shop keepers, office workers; but there

was one only child who did not come from a conventional nuclear family, only one. That was a little boy whose mother was a widow, and she kept a shop in Jackson Street, and that was her livelihood. She couldn't come and be with the teachers during the morning, but that was the only child that didn't have a mother and father at home.

H: Was there a sense that the children of professional classes didn't think kindergarten was right for their children?

I: Oh, no, I don't think so. We had sort of semi-professional if you call it; we had children of a Chemist, a Pharmacist, a Doctor's children. I can't think of some of the others, but they weren't in the majority because they weren't because they weren't in the majority of the residents. This was Petone. I would say it was very representative of the people who lived near the kindergarten.

H: Did you do any things that were different to NZ kindergarten programmes of the time?

I: I didn't divide the children into groups of tiny's, middles and tops. I didn't divide the equipment. Instead of having blocks there, half set blocks there for those children, and half a set of blocks there for those children, we had all the blocks in one place and the painting table somewhere else, so that the children, any child, could move freely indoors and out from room to room according to what they wanted to play with.

H: Now how easy was that to transform?

I: Actually I sat down with my assistant and the two students before the children actually came to kindergarten, and said, “Well, I've never seen this [free play] working. I've heard about it, would you like to try it?

H: So you had heard about these new approaches

I: Oh, I'd heard about it.

H: Where did you hear about it?

I: From other teachers in the London County Council Services I had worked with

H: What was it called? Did it have a name, this kind of programme?

I: Not that I know of. I just heard of it, and I thought that sounds good. And always, you must remember, that it was my experience, not just of having children by the day but having children through the night, and the week-ends, and the holidays, and the lot. It was that that stood me in good stead in all these things.

H: What did you think was going to be good about it?

I: No control problems. Suddenly the tensions weren't there, and so I said to the staff at kindergarten, "would you like to try it?" And they said, "Oh, yes, fine". So we did, and it went like a charm. There were hiccups, there were difficulties. We didn't quite know how to organise this, or see that everybody got at least a chance at of having a story, or whatever; didn't miss out on morning tea, or whatever. Those were the milk and apples days. But all the tensions went. There weren't any control problems. As sweet at a nut!

H: What did the other staff feel about it?

I: The other staff loved it. They really liked it. I've been that the training centre staff had to stop allowing students to choose where they would like to go and do their teaching practice, because they all wanted to come to Petone. I can remember we took the children one day for a walk somewhere, to see some ducks or whatever, and the student who was officially managing it was trying to get all the children to hold hands and walk in twos. And I said, "Look, can I interrupt? You go to the front, and don't let anybody pass you at all. I'll come up the back and do my bit", and they can all just walk as they like, no hand holding, no nothing. When they came back the student said to me, “I would never have believed it.” Once you allowed the children to dictate their own pace you were their safeguard, as back up, as resource, but you weren't there to tell them what they wanted to do because they knew better than you did.

H: What about the parents, the mothers, how did they think?

I: Some of them were interested. Some of them were appalled. They weren't bringing anything home for mother to see, and what they did was an awful mess. They were very critical, some of them, and some of them were very accepting, and really liked it very much, and kept on coming.

H: What was it they were seeing they liked?

I: I think it was the air of business and the children were happy. We didn't really have any crying or squabbles, or fights, or anything.

H: Those parents that were less happy, what was it that they were perhaps concerned about?

I: Aah! No order, no discipline, no learning. No, nothing to take home to mother. There was no discipline, that was their concern.

H: What was the reaction of the other kindergartens to this?

I: They were very cross with me most of them, because I was an interloper. I went to a staff meeting as we all did, once a month or whenever it was, and one of the training staff said to me, "Would you talk about your programme?" I said, "Yes. Now what do you want me to talk about?" I've forgotten now what I did say. Then this member of the training staff, who shall be nameless, said to all the other teachers who were there, "Now, you've all heard about these programmes and you will now put them into effect."

H: So that's how it was done, just like that? What date was that?

I: 1949-1950. Yeah they were told. You've got to do that, that's it.

H: And were very upset about it.

I: They sure were. I don't blame them. My blood ran cold. It was an awful thing to do.

H: Why do you think they made the change so suddenly?

I: I don't know. I think it was a sense of safety. We'll all do the same thing, then we know where we are.

H: They weren't afraid that there was going to be chaos out there?

I:
Perhaps they thought, we are a training institution, therefore its up to us to ensure that the students have the benefit of seeing modern practice. Mind you, their training centres had the most incredible authority over the kindergartens in their charge, so to speak; and when the students went out to, Waipukurau or somewhere or other, they did what they knew. I think another thing was that I was slightly older than most of the other teachers, and that it takes a certain amount of maturity to let go. I think that probably goes the same with the teaching staff, they couldn't let go, they had to make sure everybody did what they were told.

H: How did that transformation occur in the other kindergartens?

I: A very mixed bag. Some of them did it reluctantly, and it was not successful. Some did it well, and oh better than anything I ever did. I saw some teachers with the most lovely programmes. Some were absolute chaos and mayhem, because they didn't know that even if you had free activity you did have some limits somewhere. It was a great old mixture, and sometimes I think, well it rippled out from me and other people who had caught the light at about the same time. Sometimes I wondered whether it was a good move or a bad, because with an insecure young teacher it can be chaos and mayhem. For a child I would rather have a programme a bit too structured than a bit too free.

H: You'd had the appointment of Moira Gallagher into the Department who was supporting this new kind of programme? Can you explain your perception of what was happening there through the Department.

I: I didn't really know. Miss Gallagher came to see us a couple of times I remember. Once we were all outside watching a bulldozer down the road. Then we came back and the kindergarten day started, and she talked to me. But I didn't really know who she was, or where she came from, or what the Department was. I'd never heard of a Department.

H: Would that be after she'd been overseas? Soon after her appointment she actually went overseas.

I: Yes, she did. When she got to England she met a number of teachers who said, “Do you know Miss Christison who came to New Zealand.” I had passed her in mid stream. It wasn't for some time later that I had heard what a Department was, and who she was.

H: Did you have contact with the other Associations at all? What was happening in Christchurch or Dunedin?

I: Not when I was a teacher. Not until the time I went into the Wellington Training Centre. When I went into the Training Centre we had a yearly meeting with the training staff of the other three training institutions. When I was in Petone I had no idea that there was another Kindergarten Association in Hastings, or New Plymouth, or anything else like that.

H: It was a time of rapid expansion in kindergartens. Did you have long waiting lists and things like that?

I: Yes we did. And we had a waiting list that was very strictly administered, because we had far more children wanting to come and get in.

H: When did you go into the training programme?

I: May, 1950. I was at Petone a year and a bit. I plucked myself out, because I couldn't live on the pay. The pay was dreadful.

H: What did that entail, moving into the training programme?

I: A lot of bluff. Now that I look back, I had got a fair amount of experience with young children under my belt, but I hadn't really the theory to back it up with. And this is where Gwen Somerset played a quite decisive part, in that I was floundering. Where do I go to learn these things? She put me in touch with, not only her own excellent publications for the Playcentre Movement, but pushed me into going to lectures at Victoria, as a voluntary student? I thought I go to lectures, but wasn't going to bother with the exams. When I got up to Victoria and I found the students that I was with, well if they can, I can. So I said, "Yes, please, I am going to take the exams", and went on. That's where I got the background of theory to underpin what I knew from practice.

H: There wouldn't have been many kindergarten teachers going to a university would there?

I: I don't think there were any.

H: What was the kind of theory that was being taught at that stage? What were they saying about how child development?

I: I can't remember any great dichotomy between what was being thought and felt with the people who were with the children, and the people who were at the textbooks at the other end. Some of it seemed to be a bit academic in its uses and not very practical. There was a lot about intellectual development. The whole concept of the emotional development of the child and the influence of that on other aspects of development was coming growing.

H: Would this be going right back to some of Freud's work coming through in to more popular literature?

I: It was Freud, and Susan Isaacs and people like that.

H: Piaget, was he being taught as you talked about intellectual development?

I: Not really at that point, that came later. Yes, at this time I remember there was excitement. Aah! we're learning about emotional development, and a child with bed wetting problems is not necessarily just a physical problem. It could be this, that, and the other, and so on. And we have to deal with the problems of separation which were coming to be understood for the first time. But at that time the interest in the emotional side of development led to a down grading of this manipulative material and the emphasis on the intellectual. Forget about puzzles.

H: How did you see this in terms of the programme that you had been running? How did you balance that, or see the balance?

I: I was working from the gut instinct, yes. After all I had seen so many children at that stage. I had a gut instinct about what made kids tick.

H: Tell me about the training programme.

I: I think it would be patchy. Again, there was just a dreadful dearth of textbooks and there wasn't much being written at that time. Some of the lecturers whom the training centres employed at that time, because of the money, were not really up with the work that the teachers were going to do when they had had their training. I can remember that the English lecturer was only a university student herself. The art, as far as I can remember, was good, and other things like history of education and so on, were just not there at all. And other things I think were pretty well managed, in that the student teachers got a jolly good look at children before they became teachers themselves. They had good practice, and plenty of it. Their training really was based on the practice that they had when they went out into kindergartens, which is good in a way, and that made them reasonably confident; but not so good in that they didn't have the theoretical underpinning to enable them how to cope if the situation changed.

H: At that time, of course, there'd been a shift in what was the practice of the kindergarten from this fairly timetabled, structured, programme. How was that reflected in the training programme?

I: Well, I did that myself, you see, that was my pigeon. I was fairly shallowly based then myself, but at least we shared it together.

H: Was there any sort of in-service training for the kindergarten teach?

I: I don't think that there was much to support them. Miss Gallagher was the only person in the Department, and she was very thin on the ground. We had no senior or supervisory head teachers in those days. There was, in the training centre at that time, a Principal, an Assistant Principal; and then somebody called a Supervisor of Students, and that was the person who was required to see the students in practice, and move from kindergarten to kindergarten. She acted as a sort of diffuser of practice.

H: You talked about meeting and being with Gwen Somerset. What was actually happening alongside Play Centre?

I: When I started in the kindergarten we had very recently, before my time, an afternoon kindergarten, but it was called Play Centre. It was twice a week in the afternoon, and somebody said, "Oh, you needn't worry, the children just play". I didn't know what was the difference myself,

but they just played. We used to have a Play Centre person trained as a Play Centre Movement helper come into the kindergarten, because the students had gone into the college for afternoon lectures. They had morning practice and afternoon lectures. To help out the staff, (remember we had three groups of children) we needed somebody else. We heard about Play Centres, and Play Centre mothers and trainee supervisors came to see us. In that first year at kindergarten I only had 9 days without visitors. They all came. Gwen had started her lectures then, and she asked me to help her with the practical work, so that if she was talking about finger painting she would do the talking and I was busily mixing up the painting and saying, "I think you'd better take your coat off, or roll up your sleeves," or what have you, to the students. I was lucky, I got a whole lot of Gwen's lectures with her Play Centre people, and this is where we compared notes. How the other kindergartens got on I don't know. I just did it because that's what I wanted to do; but I thought it would be a good thing to do.

H: So what was the comparison of notes? Were you that different at that stage?

I: We were different in physical resources. The kindergarten could do a lot of things that the Play Centres couldn't, simply because the kindergarten had got a home and a playground, and a place to put their equipment. Otherwise the Play Centre programmes were more unstructured, freer, but really there was very little difference in actual practice and treatment of the children, and the organisation of activities. A good kindergarten and a good Play Centre, as far as the children went, I don't think they would have been any different. They fed off each other, the kindergartens and the Play Centres. And initially they were very good friends, until each movement had developed more firmly its own philosophy, and that meant that yours had to be the best. At that stage they they were very close.

H: The myth has been that the Play Centres were always free.

I: Oh, no, they weren't. They were just as structured according to the person who was running them, and according to what the kindergarten down the road was doing. They influenced each other, sometimes to be different. "Oh, they're free. We are disciplined". And sometimes it was, "they are doing it, let us do it, too". But they certainly affected each other. They often used the same building. I think it was in Eastbourne they had the kindergarten in the hall there in the morning, and the Play Centre in the afternoon.

H: When did you join the Department?

I: There was only me. Miss Gallagher and me. I became Moira's assistant. She used to describe me as her eyes and ears, and that was my job to go out on the ground.

H: How did you get the job against everybody else? .

I: I have no idea. Just applied for it. The pay was much better. The job seemed more interesting. Besides you see I'd come from England.

H: What was the reaction from kindergarten to the Department's new role?

I: Prickles. In one Association I wasn't allowed to go where I wanted to go. I was taken and somebody stayed with me all the time too, to see that I wasn't preaching heresy. It varied so much. Some were doing absolutely delightful work in the most awful circumstances, and some were really struggling. A lot of them wanted a life raft, because here they were in a single kindergarten associations, and the association, the committee, the parents involved in the one operation. They hadn't really been prepared for these new pressures; and indeed, I don't know who could have been prepared for them. The variety was tremendous. The response to, "How about trying this?" varied greatly indeed. Some took to a less structured programme like a duck to water. Some threw out the baby with the bath water. Some refused point blank to move. And there it was. The teachers varied so much too, from the ones where, "You're not going to tell me what to do!" to "Please help, help, I'm drowning". I can remember one teacher that I went to see, and because of the public transport, which was all that was available in those days, I'd got there pretty early. I asked the teacher how she was getting on, and she said, well she did have control problems. And I said, Well, who with? And she pointed out a child. And I said, "Well, you just watch me." I didn't have to do anything drastic at all, just said to the child, "No!" and meant it, and went on saying it, and said, "You'd better go outside until you've got this done." When I left I found that the teacher was flushed with triumph over this. Some didn't need any help from me, I was just delighted to be there and get in the sand pit and play with the kids.

H: Describe to me a programme that, at that stage that was working really well.

I: There was a teacher and an assistant, and a student, and one or two mothers, all in together. I'll tell you the way I can describe it best, because this happened in a kindergarten where I was. It was going sweet as a nut, and I was sitting in the doorway just watching the children in little groups clustered round an adult, it could have been a student. There was someone in the garden over there, and over there. Somebody from the Association, the Secretary of the Association came in and she looked at this moving group of children with adults apparently doing nothing. She looked around, and she said, "You can 't fool me. You can't fool me. It looks so easy, but I just know how much hard work's been put in to this". You know, that was the best way to describe it.

H: What was the reaction from the Associations?

I: The Associations were very proud of what they had done. And they had done very well. Sometimes they put great pressure on the teachers without meaning to, "She was our girl", and often she was our girl who'd been to high school there, and gone away and come back again, and she was still a school girl. Some of them were very antagonistic. I can remember going to one place where they had a teacher and an untrained assistant, which was normal; and the teacher had been sick and was away for a few days, and the Association had <u>not</u> appointed a relieving teacher, which at that time they were entitled to do because Mrs Jones, or whoever, the untrained teacher she can manage perfectly well, why should they? Why spend money on doing this sort of thing. Some were very non-understanding about what the children needed. Some had done a tremendous lot of work to get a kindergarten going at all, and were more than a little put out, and resentful, and shocked, when Departmental policy in later years required kindergarten to get their own buildings. They'd got a kindergarten hadn't they? This was all right and couldn't see why a purpose designed building, which meant a lot more money raising and work, and so on, was necessary. Associations differed as much as anybody else, and some of the welcoming, delightful, people you could ever imagine. Did you see on television the other night the Alexandra Heartland programme? Well I loved Alexandra, but this television programme, to me, absolutely brought out the strong community feeling that you got often in the smaller towns, and their pride in what they were doing, and their friendly ‘matyness’ with all the people involved. There was more than one kindergarten where the kindergarten was next door to the school, and there was no fence in between. One in particular I'm thinking of, where the staff and the children of the kindergarten, and the lower part of the infants school were connected. Some new entrant children at school really weren't ready, so they used to come down for a time to the kindergarten. One of the teachers from the school came into the kindergarten to teach music, because she was good and enjoyed doing it. Often enough, the kindergarten teacher would

take a handful of kids and go up to the school; and it really was good. So you got every sort of Association. Some of the bigger Associations were fiercely proud and independent, and very affronted to think that any government department had anything to do with them, except to shell out some money here and there. Never a dull moment.

H: During 1950s there were changes also happening in the infant schools as they were called at that stage, with the developmental programmes being set up. Was there any connection between what you were doing and what was happening there, because you were in the Department?

I: A lot depended on the local District Senior Inspector. I can remember going to New Plymouth where Neville Harris was the District Senior, and Joyce Burnett was what we called the Infant Adviser; and we worked all together on programmes from kindergarten and primary teachers. This went on because in Auckland by this time is Esme Temple had joined us, and Esme had been Infant Adviser, and was very interested in the merging of the two services; but it depended, as always, on personalities. There were people who were interested and willing to accept the connection, and there were people who saw it as an infringement on their territory. Usually the staff of the junior department of the primary schools were interested, but it was often the senior staff in the school who were not quite sure, because after all they did have a statutory responsibility for providing experiences for the children in their care. If you let down the bars and you have free play in school, did they get their reading readiness programmes and so on. I went to one school where a junior teacher was trying to do this with some help, and the infant mistress, as she was then, saying to her, “Oh, by tomorrow we'll just put it all back again.”

H: We've talked about the relationship between the Department and kindergartens. What about the Department and Play Centres.

I:

Oh, it was prickly. I think one was Play Centres' very understandable pride in 'the fact that “We are parents' and only parents are really the people to cater for children”. The department too, it must be said, stuck with labels which said 'negative, 'rigid', 'inflexible', 'bureaucratic', la da de da, and very largely it was a difficult coexistence. The Play Centres wanted government help for certain things, but were very loath to accept that tax payers money had to be accounted for, and they will have to give something in return. The individual Play Centre, supervisors, and mothers, and what have you, were accepting and friendly, and so on. But the Play Centre hierarchy was wary of departmental

things and people. I can remember when I was in Christchurch, that the local Association asked me as a Departmental auditor, to go in and help them set in, and work for the first week or two, with a brand new Play Centre. We had great fun doing that. But in another Play Centre somebody would just say, "Well, what are you here for?" They were terribly short of money. But the difficulty was that if its tax payers money somehow its got to be accounted for, and therefore put on to something measurable. The Play Centre Movement didn't have much that was measurable at that time, because they were very reflective of the community that they lived in, so that Play Centre A was totally different to Play Centre B.

H: When was it that you took over Moira's position of Officer for Pre-School Education.?

I: 1965.

H: And there was a staff of how many by that stage?

I:
Let me try and think. In Wellington there was Margaret Bennett, and Leone Shaw there at that time. In Auckland there was Esme, Marion Mansel and Elizabeth Connolly. In Christchurch there was Margaret Branch, Margaret Calder as she is now. Is that all? Yes, I think it might have been. I can't remember, but it a good deal later than that that we split up into all the Education Board districts; and later still that we got people in Invercargill and Rotorua.

H: Let's move into the 1960s. You had a change of position. What was the scene for early childhood in your view in the 1960s? Was the programme changing at all?

I: I think the programmes were settling down. They were stable I think. Some were more directed than others were, but so what. They were accepted. Staffing likewise. The jobs to be done were the expansion of the service, were queues of people knocking at the gates, and the existing services couldn't meet them; coupled with a fear that this would lead to an ‘overblowing’, and the necessary constraints on government finance. So a plan had to be adopted which started life being called Programme of Controlled Expansion, and ended up being called The Building Programme. That began life as a programme of controlled expansion, because what had happened was that the kindergarten service had expanded so greatly that there weren't enough staff to go round; and it was attempting to hold the line on that one by saying, You can't have a new kindergarten until all your

other kindergartens are staffed with fully trained staff. So that the smaller centres, like for example Havelock North said, “Blow Hastings, we'll have our own Association.” And a whole lot of small Associations came into operation, because they could open. The brakes simply didn't hold. It was after that that they brought in the Building Programme that required all kindergartens to be housed suitably, and a building programme according to who was ready, who'd got the money, where the need was, and so on. Then you get into the act of, where is the need? Is the need up there worse than the need down there?

H: That must have been a hard decision, because I imagine the need was everywhere.

I: Well, the Department very cunningly gave it over to the local people to decide that one. The Union decided decided the priority, and the Department decided the number of new programmes. It was over to the Union and advice from the Associations on which ones they were.

H: What's your rationale for why there was this huge demand for pre-school education?

I: People could see what was happening, and especially with kindergartens. Play Centres were doing their stuff, but the kindergarten was the visible thing because it had a physical presence down the street, and a building - you could see it. But with the Play Centres and the kindergartens I think the success was that the children enjoyed it, and they flourished, and so did the parents. I don't know how much rationale there was behind it, it was just a good thing.

H: To what extent was it being said that this was preparing children for school?

I: Oh, yes, quite a lot. A whole lot of educators saw it as preparing children for school. And lets say a lot of people in the ordinary teaching staff said, "that's preparing children for school".

H: Was there a tension in that?

I: I think there was, because you want them to know this, this, this, by the time they get to you. The teachers in the Early Childhood Service, kindergarten and Play Centre, and by this time Child Care too was saying, "No. No. No. It is up to you to take the children from where they are when you get them from us". And every group blamed the one below. The secondary school says that children coming to them didn't know this, this, and this. The primary teaching service said the

children coming in from Pre-School didn't know this, this and this. And the Pre-School people blamed the parents.

H: Was there any connection between what you were doing and child care centres?

I: Not much. What there was, was intended to be informal, because the child care centres were licenced by Social Welfare, and we had very good relations with the individual social welfare officers, but not with the actual work. There was some knowledge, because we were asked to go in with the Social Welfare people and see places.

H: What were you seeing?

I: Its hard to say, because we were usually brought in when things were going wrong. Children kept in bed for far too long, because what else do we do with them? More children than could be accommodated, and very sterile programmes. As I say, we didn't really see all that much of them until trouble came.

H: Take me through those later years over the key issues facing early childhood

I: There was a lot. I think the whole period, now I come to look at it, was marked with the problems of expansion, which meant teachers and training. As that expanded it came against other services, like Play Centre or schools or whatever. It was expansion in the Department's own services, in that we needed people to go out and give help to new Associations, staff and teachers. Some of the pre-school advisers that we had had come from other disciplines. That involved, not so much problems, but a melding exercise. There were problems of getting services to places which previously hadn't qualified, and now needed them. Sometimes I thought that there were always problems with administrations and were the kindergarten Association the best way? Who represented the Associations? Did the Kindergarten Union do this and what have you. Sometimes I think that if it were Moira who invented the service, it was my job to be there when the services varied their provision. It was in those years that we got some mighty milestones, like the training of teachers in Teachers Colleges. We also got things like the mobiles kindergarten, equipment grants to non-profit making groups, the correspondence school; all those things. All of this involved consultations and working out the financial and administration difficulties. I can remember Roger Hall was at that time in school publications in the Department, and he came to see me at one point

and he said, "Where are you?" And I said to him, "Well, you know Rivita? Its got one plain side and one bumpy side." Well we're on the bumpy side. And we always seemed to be on the bumpy side. There were a whole lot of things like the Hill Report, and that spawned new things like the Advisory Council for Pre-school education. It was a great idea, but occasionally it struck me that everybody came and sat round a table, bringing their barrows, all pushing it and going crash in the middle. The district pre-school committees, some of them had a wonderful time telling each other how good they were and by implications others were not so good. Others were absolutely delightful, and got on well. They enjoyed each other's company. They worked together. It was a matter, as always, of the personalities involved that we got those two. We got this thing called Health Education Welfare Early Childhood Liaison Committee. That was the same sort of thing, which probably died a natural death because it was unwieldy but they were very honest attempts to get the various methods of the services going together.

H: The Hill Report. What's your analysis of it?

I: Oh, my analysis is that it tidied up some administrative ends, but it didn't really have any vision.

H: It was the first one since the Bailey Report, which people said had vision, even though perhaps the vision went far beyond what was ever practical to do.

I: Yes. The Bailey Report hitched the early childhood people to the schools didn't it? I've got some doubts about the wisdom of that. As a matter of fact, I believe that if you could stick with a nice balance between voluntary and State that's a good way to go. But it is difficult.

H: You retired in 1979. When you look back what were some of the good things that you would see had happened during, say, the 1960s and 1970s?

I: Early childhood was on the map. It was there, and everybody knew about it. The people now coming up to positions of responsibility in government departments, local administration, teaching services, health services, A lot more people had been involved in the early childhood system in one form or another, as children, or parents, or whatever. Now early childhood was there. And it was not only there, it was of good quality. People could regard it with respect and affection, and something worth supporting. That, I think, is about as much as you can ask of anything.

H: At the same time people still talked about or pre-school a sbeing the Cinderella service of the Education system. Was that a feeling you had had, or not?

I: Look, it was up to a point. You see Departmental officers who were not necessarily concerned in education things, like the buildings boys, or the people who worked in salaries, or something like that, to have another load of work, and having to deal with kindergarten buildings and acquisition sites, and salaries of kindergarten teachers who left to have babies and then came back again, and so on. It was just an extra for them. So in a sense, the early childhood people in the Department were a thorn in the flesh. But in other senses, in the people who dealt with children, and also the people who knew that no where in life can you draw a nice square and say everything belongs in there we were a force to be welcomed and to be reckoned with. As I say, we were there. I think that was the great achievement of those years.

H: You described to me your kindergarten in 1949 in Petone, how you changed and transformed it. How would you describe a typical kindergarten programme by the late 1970s?

I: I think they had changed, but the thing I had still a quibble about then is that they still hadn't really got the courage to make the kindergarten fit the particular community and those particular children. I would welcome the fact that some teachers, for very good reasons, had a more structured programme. I would welcome much more attention given to afternoon children. And that I think would be my criticism, that although some of the barriers of the programme had been dropped down, I didn't really think that they had been re-made to fit an individual teacher and her children.

H: During this time you, of course, were continuing with your academic study. Tell me about that, because you did complete your Masters degree?

I: In the early years, I started off being an internal student on a part-time basis, and I acquired three units that way, in the days of a 9 unit degree. And then the next three units with great difficulties as a part-time external student. I remember swatting in pretty awful hotel lounges over a week-end when everybody else was listening to the races, or down at the bar, and I was swatting up Piaget upstairs in the hotel lounge. Then I took a year's leave without pay, and I cleaned up the last three units. Had the time of my life. Loved it. I am still in close touch with the people I met at that time. And after that I got a commissioned bursary for a year's leave with pay to do masters papers.

H: What was the reaction to somebody who wanted to study pre-school education?

I: There was no study of early childhood education to be studied. That was that. You studied education, and education and psychology as a second stream, so that was it. But in those years, on the staff of Victoria University there was Colin Bailey who was interested, and Crawford Somerset who was really interested because of his wife, as well as his own ethos; and Arthur Fieldhouse who was also interested. So they were all interested, but early childhood education wasn't a thing in itself in the university in those days.