

Elizabeth Tunks

I was born in Auckland & went to school here. When I left school in 1938 there were limited careers available for women...teaching, nursing. My father said "I don't think Karitane, what about kindergarten training?" Well I didn't know, so I cheerfully said "Yes all right".

I was interviewed by the then Principal, Constance Colegrove, in her home. She was tall, could be imposing, had a good sense of humour. I later found her to be firm and fair in her dealings with us.

We had to have had at least three years secondary education to apply, and she asked the usual questions, including the state of my health. All I could think to say was that I could play hockey so must be reasonably athletic. Later on there was a physical examination as well as the interview, though it was discontinued at some stage

Our training was in two parts. In the mornings we were sent to a kindergarten for a term. There was only a morning session then. We went into Myers Kindergarten downstairs for lectures in the afternoons except for Friday afternoons, which were free.

We sat around a table in what was then the staff room for the lectures, which were given by Constance Colegrove for the basic subjects, including psychology and history of education. These included the beginnings of the kindergarten movement and educators such as Froebel and Pestalozzi, Montessori and the McMillan sisters. Mrs Slingsby Newman took us for art and someone else for music.

We were also required to make a toy in the first year and to knit a jumper in the second. My jumper was not a success as the ribbing on the sleeves was much too tight. The toy was better...I got some towelling and a pattern and made a stuffed lamb. It proved very useful in the kindergartens and I used to make one when the kindergarten I was at had fairs. I remember one of the boys ... his mother bought the lamb and he wouldn't go to bed without the lamb and when she wanted to wash lambie she wasn't very popular. Being white it got very grubby.

It may seem as if the training was sketchy but we had hands-on experience in at least 6 different kindergartens. I was sent to Sunbeams in Eden Terrace, St James in Grey Lynn, Campbell in Victoria Park, Otahuhu (an old house that leaked), Ponsonby and Myers. The old Campbell building in Victoria Park is still there very close to the Northern Motorway...it was relocated to Tahuna Street.

At Myers the sandpit was inside but there was no fence around the play area out in front. We always had to be alert during outdoors playtime because a child could slip away either down to the high slides in the Park, which were much higher than they are now, or up into Queen Street. One teacher

patrolled the building and the others were outside. At Campbell there was nothing but us to keep them from exploring Victoria Park or the street.

We were not paid during our training although we were supposed to receive ten pounds a term or year but, as we also had to pay that amount for materials, one cancelled out the other. Our parents kept us during that time, thus limiting those who could train. Those who came from outside Auckland had to board, an additional expense.

When our group of four got our Diplomas at the end of 1940 there were no positions vacant. The class had started with larger numbers but some fell by the wayside. After a while I got a temporary position as an assistant teacher at Northcote Kindergarten, but because the kindergarten committee was hard up the salary was only sixty pounds per annum instead of seventy. The journey from home in Remuera by tram, boat and bus took almost half that amount, but I was very pleased to be employed at last.

Then a new kindergarten was opened at Birkenhead and the teacher from Otahuhu was appointed Director (Head Teacher) so I was lucky enough to get the assistant's position at Otahuhu. This was better financially as it involved only a bus trip and if we bought our weekly tickets at the bus company's office at the other end of Otahuhu we got them at a discount. Sometimes we took the children 'on the rope' when we went to collect the tickets.

The 'rope' had loops along its length, one for each child to hold, with a teacher in front and sometimes one behind. It was of course a 'crime' to let go your loop. The rope was also used for escort duties when we took the children part of the way home after the session.

At about this time the government began to tax our hitherto untaxed salaries. The Director, Mary Thomson (nee Hamlin), said she felt a "very uncivil servant" that day.

At each kindergarten there were two committees. One ran the kindergarten financially, paying the teachers' salaries, rent and upkeep. Members often came from districts other than the one in which the kindergarten was sited. For example, when I worked at St. James Kindergarten the committee came from Remuera and Epsom. The Mother's Committee was usually run by the Director, as Head Teachers were called then. They met once a month, ran raffles, fairs, held functions with a speaker and had working bees. The money raised was for such things as equipment

Donations from the parents were entirely voluntary. An envelope was sent home once a week but no amount was ever stated.

From Otahuhu I went back to Northcote as Head Teacher. The session was held in the RSA clubrooms. This was a house that had never been completed. All equipment had to be put away each night in a cupboard under the stairs. Later we moved to the Methodist Church Hall with slightly better storage space, but we all became good at improvising. For example, cheese

boxes were good for storing puzzles. This of course was wartime and books especially were in very short supply. I can recall only being able to buy two new picture books during that time. We told stories, illustrating them on a blackboard to the best of our ability, which in my case was very limited. For "The Three Little Pigs" my best effort was the wolf's hindquarters sticking out of the chimney. I couldn't have drawn the rest of him to save my life!

My next appointment was to St James in Grey Lynn. This was a purpose-built kindergarten with a small, all-concrete playground at the rear of the building, making supervision awkward. There was a big room, a sunporch and two smaller rooms. The children were divided into three 'classes'...the tinies in the sunporch with the assistant, middle class in one small room with the junior student, and the tops (4 ½ year olds) with the senior student in the other. The ages were 3 to 5, but there was a time when our rolls were low and we were allowed to take 2 ½. Considering our programme, some aged 2 ½ could cope but some of them were not ready.

As the programme became freer, classes were abandoned and we took down the wall between the two little rooms, leaving two good-sized rooms and the sunporch. When a morning rest was part of the session, the stretchers were put out in the big room. Then, for a time, some children stayed for lunch so rest time was moved to the afternoon. Then the waiting list grew and second sessions were introduced and rest time was dropped.

Later we were able to buy the section, originally a tennis court, behind the concrete area. This was a huge improvement, allowing room to run and space for more equipment. Dr. Isabel Houghton, at that time Medical Officer for the kindergartens, gave us a willow shoot, so eventually there was a beautiful big tree at the far end. We also kept rabbits briefly and, for longer, bantams.

St James had a chequered career, I think it's had two fires in its time and after one they made quite a number of alterations, made by the Department of Education I presume. The toilets were moved and had labels that said "Boys" and "Girls" and that made us laugh.

At the end of 1961 the St. Heliers Kindergarten was finally opened after years of fundraising and I was appointed Head Teacher there and stayed until my retirement in 1978. Starting from scratch was a new experience. Equipment was being built up and I'd never played so many ball games before! The building was bright and airy although the small outdoor play area was hard to adjust to, but as it was in front of the building, both inside and out could be seen from almost everywhere.

After Gwen Gilbert retired from Ponsonby Kindergarten we inherited Mrs Nada Foley, who was a very good voluntary helper. Some of her grandchildren came to St. Heliers and after a tentative start she came too. She was a very good pianist and we had this marvellous piano music, sometimes for nearly two hours, with the children coming and going throughout. She had a great ability to adapt her playing to whatever the child

chose to do, so that if one was skipping she would instantly provide a tune to match from her wide repertoire. I don't know anyone else who could 'read' the children as she could. They were very fortunate children. Incidentally, being able to play the piano was once a prerequisite for training, and I was asked at my interview if I could play. If you couldn't you had to learn, not always successfully. But none of us could do what Mrs Foley could.

Fay Cawkwell came after Constance Colegrove as Principal of the AKA. Not an easy person, nevertheless she was ahead of her time in many ways, including a freer programme and better equipment such as the posture chairs, multiple unit blocks and other things. She was keen for the Training Centre to move to the Arney Road site. By that time the staff had grown considerably with Nettie Burt as Vice Principal, Lucy Rothbury, Joan Brockett, Betty Cosson, Margaret McBean and Margaret Turnbull. Other lecturers came as needed.

Jessie Neill was the AKA Secretary. Her office was in Myers Kindergarten in a room inside the 'Parents Door', a rather cold spot. She came after whoever destroyed some records...a thing she would never have done. She was very efficient and grew to have a wide knowledge of the AKA.

The law firm Jackson, Russell, Tunks and West acted for the AKA on a voluntary basis. My father, Charles Tunks, was senior partner. After he died in 1941 Jim Rose, then senior partner, took over the work for the AKA and was also helpful to the Kindergarten Teachers Association (KTA) when the officers were in Auckland.

The New Zealand Free Kindergarten Teachers Association (NZFKTA) was started by the four Principals throughout New Zealand and then carried on by officers elected by the delegates, one from each Association in New Zealand. There had to be a certain number of members before we could become a recognised Service Association like the NZEI and the PPTA, able to approach the Minister.

So Nettie Burt and I, the first President and Secretary, took our list of members to Professor Algie, the then Minister of Education. He approved our application and we went ahead. Our first task was to organise a Constitution.

Our first efforts were of course for better salaries from the government because ours were so low, fewer children per teacher, and the matter of dismissal of an unsatisfactory teacher. We wanted the teacher to be given warning, help from a member of the KTA and only then could the question of dismissal be considered. All this was quite new to us, and the first salary case was actually prepared by the two who came after us – Phyllis Varcoe and Margaret Just from Dunedin.

After their two years in office, Biddy Unwin as Secretary and me as President landed the job again and immediately met a crisis. On a Monday we were told we were wanted in Wellington on the Friday to negotiate. Fortunately,

Moira Gallagher, who was the Officer for Pre-School Education, rang me and said "It has occurred to me that you may not have authority to negotiate" and sure enough of course we hadn't, we'd never thought about that. So she said "The KTA delegates have elected you so presumably they have faith in you, but you'd better consult a lawyer"! So I went to see then senior partner Jim Rose in my father's law firm, Bidy got mailed permission, and we set off to Wellington by train, with the case we'd barely had time to study in detail.

We were met by Rosemary McEwen, KTA Vice President, were given coffee and sandwiches by Moira and sent on our way. Then we met various officials and presented our case. We were very fortunate that time because the Department had put forward a proposal and we were lent an office to discuss its merits compared to ours. We thought that theirs was much better than ours...for instance, it followed, though at a lower rate, the NZEI steps, so we went back to the officials and said, "Thank you very much, we prefer yours". So in due course kindergarten teachers throughout New Zealand got a rather better deal. There have of course been many more negotiations since then.

I had four years in office and we worked on teacher numbers because our classes were so big (some kindergartens had more than 20 children to a teacher), and conditions generally.

Moira Gallagher, the first Officer for Preschool Education, was really instrumental in encouraging kindergartens into a more professional role as opposed to the predominantly welfare one they had previously. She visited and encouraged throughout New Zealand and also wrote a manual especially for establishment committees that became a valuable reference book.

Our yearly meetings were generally held in Wellington as that was central and the Department of Education was there so we could get an answer to anything we needed to know quickly. There was discussion at one stage about compulsory membership – most teachers joined anyway. Many people felt that we should be part of the NZEI. We had doubts about that because we spoke for ourselves and also thought we might lose our identity.

At one stage I did a year as a relieving pre-school advisor for the Department of Education, filling in for somebody who was overseas. This meant visiting kindergartens and playcentres and writing reports.

The New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union was the Union of all Associations in New Zealand. Mrs Downer was the great President of that for a long time. The headquarters was in Rotorua but she travelled around to various Associations. Auckland has a history of seceding and rejoining again.