

EARLY MEMORIES

Wendy Bowkett explains how her experiences at school shaped her childhood and, later, her early years practice, and why it's sometimes necessary to stand up for what you believe in...

In my recent articles I've looked at various situations in which 'putting yourself in someone else's shoes' - be they a child's, a student's, a colleague's or a parent's - can provide valuable insights into the way your environment is perceived. Each preschool will be different, of course, and my aim has been to write about my ethos when working with under-fives who are in close contact with adults other than their parents/carers.

Regardless of the characteristics of our individual settings or approach, all of us as practitioners have an extremely responsible and important role to fulfil. Often children's first day at nursery is the first time they have been left for any length of time with an adult who is not a close family member.



Many children will have visited their new surroundings beforehand, but there will be a number who have not and a few who have no recollection of their visit. It's important that their first experiences are positive ones, and that their time with us influences their later years for the better.

I cannot remember my first day at school (I never went to nursery and was five years-old when I started education). I remember the school building very clearly, though, and could sketch it even though I haven't been back for a visit. It had huge windows with metal frames and large doors. I don't remember displays on walls inside but do remember the blackboard. Looking out from the classrooms I could only see sky and clouds - no playground or bushes, which were hidden behind walls. I can't remember any of the teachers.

I do remember the assembly hall, which doubled up as the 'gym' where we did P.E. The hall was also used as a dining room at lunchtime - I think the only reason I remember that was because at one point our classroom was damaged by rain and we were moved, as a class, to the stage in the hall. We were behind the huge curtains across the front of the stage and all the P.E. benches were stacked in front of the curtain so that we didn't fall off. It would definitely have been 'curtains' had health and safety been around in the 60s! Every day for three weeks, after playtime, we couldn't hear our teacher speak because all the tables and chairs were being set out for lunch, and there was always the overwhelming smell of food being cooked.



about theauthor

Wendy Bowkett has worked in early years settings for over 30 years, and ran her own private day nursery for 15 years. As well as contributing to Teach Nursery, she has written a number of books for those working with 0-5-year-olds.

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I remember many other little details, reactions and comments, too, and they have influenced me throughout my life, hopefully making me a more understanding, intuitive and non-judgemental person. For example, my best friend at school lived in a children's home and was the first black person I'd met. Charlotte always seemed to be smiling whereas one of my other friends, Mary, who lived a few houses away from my family, was an only child who had everything she wanted or asked for but was quiet and often subdued. These two extremes had an amazing effect on me at the time; even though I wasn't yet six years-old, I could see such differences in their lives but, at the time, I didn't really understand why they were so different.

My parents explained that they felt that we, as a family, were fortunate, but there were both people who had more and people who had fewer opportunities and advantages than us; we all just had to make the most of what we had or were given.

A home from home

I grew up in a very loving family with two brothers and a sister, and when I started my own nursery I wanted to create a family atmosphere. I wanted somewhere for siblings to stay together, play, learn, develop and understand each other. The nursery was designed so that each room covered different areas of the curriculum and was not age restricted. Children could access any room as they wanted, so that brothers and sisters could play together or with their friends regardless of their age.

I was, and still am, of the belief that children develop at different rates in different areas of their lives. They have strengths and weaknesses in everything they do. I remember a three-year-old child at a special school I worked at who could count to 20 and understood the concept of numbers well into double figures but could not walk, and four-year-olds 'ready' for school who could run, jump and kick a ball but not understand the concept of 'two' or 'a pair'. I've known a 30-month-old who could easily pick out letters from the alphabet that corresponded to his name but could not tell you what his name was, and a two-year-old who recognised 'm' as McDonalds.

However, when Ofsted took over the inspection of preschools from Social Services, I was criticised for not separating the children into age appropriate groups. I explained that at home children are not separated into age groups - they play together, learning from one another and,

hopefully, develop an understanding of how relationships work along the way. Parents may put their baby in a cot or playpen to keep him/her safe while another child runs around but they certainly don't keep one in the kitchen and another in a sitting room while a third plays outside because they happen to be born 18 months apart.

I suggested to the inspection officer that having a mixed age range in the same room, with opportunities to go and experience another area of the curriculum, gives children the chance to integrate more easily. She asked if I could put red dots on the backs of the four-year-olds she was there to look out for.

I had been under the impression, and honestly thought, that the inspection process was to observe how our activities, attitudes, perceptions, interpretations and understanding of the Foundation Stage worked within our preschool; how children were encouraged to access the curriculum through their own interests and motivation through choice, imagination and exploration. I asked the inspector how closing the door of a room on a number of four-year-olds with the same adult(s) everyday for up to 10 hours would increase each child's experiences. Her only reply was that it made her inspection easier for everyone as she wouldn't have to keep asking staff if the child she was observing was four! I mentioned that every child, whatever his or her capabilities, could access 'all areas', and that she was at liberty to do the same to experience what was on offer.

Later that morning, the inspector was very concerned when she saw a pegboard and pegs on a table. What if a two-year-old should swallow a peg, place it in someone's ear or up their own nose? A good practitioner, which I felt included all of my colleagues, would be well aware of the dangers of having any play equipment around, even with children aged four; as such, activities were always closely observed, supervised and never left alone for children to endanger themselves or others.

Having had a wealth of experience in special, mainstream and nursery education, when I opened my own nursery the structure and ethos had been carefully thought out based on strongly held beliefs, which, I felt, were rooted in sound educational values. It isn't always easy to stand your ground but sometimes it is necessary to query the judgements of others and ask for the reasoning behind them if their perception of your methods or setting seem at odds with your own.