

Launching the Fifth City Preschool Memory Fragments: As I Remember Them

as told by Aimee Hilliard, 2018
Fifth City Preschool Organizing Director - Summer 1965-December 1966

In 1964 President Johnson's administration launched the War on Poverty with the Head Start program for preschool children as one of its programs. Mayor Richard C. Daley insisted that War on Poverty Programs all be administered through Chicago City Hall. When the Chicago Committee of Urban Opportunity Head Start Division began was unique in the nation. When it looked like Head Start funding might be available in Chicago, Donna McCleskey, Doris Hahn, Sue Burdick, Nan Grow, Ruth Marshall, Sarah Buss and I began studying programs of early childhood education. Donna was the organizer, researcher and head teacher. Sarah Buss was a full-time teacher at National College of Education.

We visited different types of programs. I particularly remember, after studying the work of Maria Montessori in Italy, that we toured a Montessori School in Chicago, a new edge in the U.S. At that time there were early childhood education programs in university laboratory schools such as the University of Chicago. Teacher training for young children was typically located in university home economics departments. The programs were at the most half day because any longer was not considered good for children. Needless to say, these schools were for families who had 'at home' mothers.

For the Fifth City Preschool proposal to insist on a full day program with a "curriculum" was a philosophical assault and proved a struggle to get approved since the women administering the program believed longer school days were not good for the children. In our curriculum and songwriting we were focused on teaching black is beautiful. While building a curriculum for the children in 5th City that we began crossing to learning about other cultures. Fred Buss and Frank Hilliard were instrumental in developing and shepherding the proposal through the system.

In September of 1965 the Fifth City Preschool proposal was approved because of our approach to addressing the victim images of the children and community. Work was begun to get the ground floor of the campus gymnasium ready for opening day. The series of approvals for licensing included the City Department of Health and the State of Illinois departments dealing with Childhood Education.

Jim Addington was the credentialed social worker on the contract so he began visiting neighborhood parents about allowing their children to attend the school. As the Organizing Director, I visited with him on some of the calls. The first parents enrolling their children in the school soon became teachers and directors of 5th City Preschool and community, including Ruth Carter, who was the preschool Director for more than forty years; Lela Moseley, who became the 5th City Corporation Director, Charlie Stewart, who taught in the Preschool; and Lilie and Ray Fox, who were pillars of the 5th City community.

In those early years, Fifth City Preschool was the only full day Head Start program in the City of Chicago. The School began with three licensed classrooms for about 48 children with two teachers in each classroom: Ruth Marshall and Nancy Loudermilk, Kaye Hayes and Rose West, Keith Standford and Phyllis Christmas. Sarah Buss, the only person on the staff with a degree in Early Childhood Education, became the consultant. Women from the North shore were very active volunteers.

Our curriculum was eclectic, comprehensive as we called it at that time, pulling insights from many different arenas:

- Basic education strategies we learned from the Lab School education approaches;

- Developmental education, responsibility and social approaches we learned from Montessori; we added reflective and motivational education (imaginal education).
- Professors Dolman and Delacato were experimenting with teaching babies to read at the University of Illinois, Champaign that we incorporated into the Infant School curriculum.
- We added intellectual content from the Ecumenical Institute curriculum into constructs with tools which communicated the message (the medium is the message). I can't emphasize enough how helpful I found this in my teaching in later years.
- Creative song writing made for exciting times with teachers meeting during nap times., writing new words about 5th City and the world to familiar children songs.
- Field trips were high lights for children, teachers and parents. A trip to downtown Chicago on the "L" was often a first experience for both parents and children. One memorable and dramatic field trip was an airplane ride over the city of Chicago. "How do you show children the city of Chicago? Put them on a plane and fly over the city!" The children were draped in yellow ponchos, which was the first preschool uniform.
- Teachers took field trips outside of Chicago, including the trip to New York City in 1969 where they visited Bank Street and the Sesame Street television show that was just starting .

Sargent Shriver, Head of Office of Economic Opportunity, visited the school during that first year. A picture with Shriver together with preschool students Ray and Terry Fox was featured in the Chicago Tribune.

Fall of 1966 the teaching staff expanded when the teachers put on the Fifth City Preschool teacher uniforms. Ruth Marshall became the Director in December 1966. Classrooms in the Chapel were added. Ruth Carter and Sarah Buss launched the Mini School .. And history began!

Summer 1967 the Fifth City Rocket was installed on the playground during the summer program. It was during this time that space travel had begun. Songs were written for the occasion, such as "I live in the universe." and "Voom voom astronaut" and became number one on the preschool hit parade. Fred Buss was the big promoter of the purchase of this dramatic piece of playground equipment, and Gene Marshall put on his hat as "engineer" and directed the construction. To this day the 5th City Rocket is used by the children of the Fifth City Preschool.

The strategy for launching a preschool as a first community program has proved very effective as ICA worked in communities around the world. Preschool education is now a proven need in the development of an educated citizenry. It is a door through which the community can work with mothers and families and train community leadership. For the Ecumenical Institute, it was also a door through which many of us were educated in the curriculum of the EI, and especially imaginal education,