

# THE FIFTH CITY PRESCHOOL (CHICAGO, 1967-68)

As told by Sandra Conant Strachan, May 2019

I had the privilege of working in the Fifth City Preschool in 1967-68. The two people who were most instrumental in creating, managing and designing the curriculum were Elise (Keith) Packard and Lela Jahn. We offered the program to children from six months to five years of age, and I worked with the 12-18 month-olds. We were housed at the Bethany Campus on the West Side of Chicago, and we had around 200 children, mostly from the families in the area. Most were from single-parent households. Each of the children wore a red outfit---a tee shirt and slacks, and the 200 included a few children of ICA staff members who were mostly white.

One of my favorite actually-happened anecdotes concerns a little white girl of three years who was talking one day with her mom, an ICA staffer, about her best friends. Out of curiosity, the mother asked, "Is your friend black or white?" The little girl looked puzzled, so the mom repeated her question. Her daughter, still looking stumped, said, "She's red, like everybody else!" They were all "red" --- and on occasion, when we visited the Art Museum downtown, a cloud of red toddlers took over the place.

Elise was the primary mover behind the curriculum, and over subsequent years, has continued to create imaginative educational options for marginalized parents. We called our educational process "Imaginal Education", an idea based on the following formula:

- People think in images.
- Images control behavior.
- Images can be changed by creating new positive images.
- Changed images = Changed behavior

Given that our "audience" consisted of children who were by and large poor, urban and African-American from uneducated and sometimes broken families, not to mention this was in the 60s, we wanted to consciously and consistently replace victim images with empowerment narratives. Songs and rituals were created that began at six months and extended until the children entered elementary school. I remember hearing that a teacher in one of the elementary schools commented that "you can always spot the kids who have been to Fifth City. They have more confidence and skills than anyone else."

The other theoretical factor in the curriculum was that of "spiral education," that is, that the content of each of the four areas (Basic (3 Rs) , Relational (social), Psychological (individual), and Imaginal) was to be adapted to each age group, spiraling to accommodate a child's increased maturity and understanding.

The entire preschool was funded by a grant from Head Start that was technically ONLY for the 3-4 year old children, i.e. the babies and toddlers were illegal. Also the teachers from the community were supposed to be teacher aides when in fact, they were full-fledged teachers of various ages. Only the people with the requisite education were Head Start-approved. Thus, when Head Start personnel made occasional, usually unannounced visits, there was a mad scramble to hide all the babies and toddlers and move the neighborhood teachers into the authorized classrooms as aides. It wasn't uncommon to see teachers racing across the courtyard with two babies under their arms!

An aside here: The community teachers were by and large GREAT educators, untrammelled by how things were "supposed to be done." A great deal of training was given and a good amount of space for individual creativity was inherent in what we did. I will never forget Wanda, a short woman who was as wide as she was tall, teaching the letter M one day. We gathered the children at the bottom of the steps, and she appeared with a tiny red cape, a large M emblazoned on her large chest, and leaped from the top step singing "Mighty Mouse is here to save the day!" I figure the kids never forgot the letter M....

The reliance on local teachers, most or all of whom were welfare mothers with limited education, was consistent with a key ICA philosophy, namely that the residents of every community have wisdom, skill and understanding that outsiders do not. As outsiders, we needed to glean their perspective and use it to create programs. The ICA was an outsider, and however well-meaning we were, we needed to create a team that reflected the reality of the community around us.

**THE DELTA PACE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT PRESCHOOL (1977-79) CHECK ALL MY YEARS/DATES....**

The Delta Pace Human Development Project (Mississippi) was launched in January 1977 with the usual community consult. Pace was a town in the Delta of 600 people, 60% black, 29% white & 1% other. I have no idea who was included in the “other.” It was a virtual ghost town due to the shifts in agriculture and employment options in the area, and many of the residents were the ‘flotsam’ of that sea change.

One of the items to emerge from the planning was a need for a preschool for children 18-24 months. There was a Head Start program in town and an elementary school. Sometime in late 1977 or the first half of 1978, we began the process of authorizing this preschool, receiving licensing and approval from the State Legislature and others. We hired a director, Olivia Leggette, mayor of a small neighboring community, and chose three teachers from the community (Lelia Ann, Dolores and Puddin) as well as a cook (Thelma). The licensing and approval process was onerous and frustrating, but we finally succeeded, thanks to Olivia and Barbara Smith, wife of the local principal. The Pace Preschool was housed in the abandoned, renovated post office. The work of getting it ready was almost entirely done by Mark Harvey, a young volunteer in the project.

In addition to community toddlers, the 15-20 children included my daughter Alison (18 months) and Ali Roper (approximately the same age). The state required one teacher per every five children and fifty square feet of outdoor space per child. We had a lovely one room space with an adjacent outside play area thanks to Mark and a fully-furnished kitchen thanks to Barbara (who could sell ice to an Eskimo.)

Among the tough sells of the process was the one to the community. Everyone was suspicious of the white folks who had invaded their town. The local white residents called us “Cofolk Workers” – a name from the Civil Rights movement of the 60s which stood for “Colored Folks.”

The preschool started slow, and without the help of the community teachers, it wouldn’t have been possible. They assuaged the fears of parents and invited eligible children, so we gradually reached our small complement of wee ones. However, we were still battling ‘ancient prejudices.’ The first rainy day we had, I received a call from Lelia Ann asking if the teachers had to come to work. I said “Of course! It’s just rain.” The only two children at school that day were Ali and Alison. People don’t work in the fields when it’s raining. We learned over time, and we also began to change images.

I want to mention one thing before closing. One of my big insights was the extraordinary replicability of the curriculum. We faithfully followed the four elements, but based the curricular activities on the local environment, our limited finances, etc. The letter B was based on Beans from the soybean fields, making bean art, eating beans; the trips included walking around Pace pointing out where things used to be. We couldn’t afford a van nor did we have insurance to transport the children. Yet we saw the same wonderful evolution in knowledge

and self-confidence in our little coterie, as well as in the teachers themselves. There were exceptions among both children and staff as well as many frustrations, but the mere existence of this resource was evidence of positive change.