

Playgroups - What did they do? Who were they for?

Ivy Webster

I arrived in Anglesey in November 1966 with my two-year-old son and six week old daughter who had been born in Cardiff the day Roger started in his new post at Bangor University. I found life difficult for the first few months, being an extremely anxious new mother and also feeling isolated and inadequate.

Then someone said, ‘Why don’t you join the Playgroup in Menai Bridge?’ I had not heard of playgroups. What did they do? Who were they for? I quickly learnt. I went along and was warmly welcomed by Mrs Hubbard, the Playgroup supervisor and by the other mothers. I stayed in the group as long as Matthew needed me and then took my turn on rota. The children and even more myself, gained so much from that Playgroup. I had spent my working life with adults and had no experience of small children until my own arrived. Roger and I thought answers could be found in books, so we read anything relevant – Dr Spock became our authority. But it was from the Playgroup that I learnt so much. The group provided a stimulating range of equipment and activities. I particularly remember one session when all the children were kneading dough, making and cooking rolls, which they proudly brought home. The children loved it there and Catrin who was too young to join was always reluctant to leave and became known as ‘Anme’, wanting to take part in everything. Her turn came when Matthew went to school and then a few years later Paul joined and also loved it. We did not realise then the wider impact that playgroups would have with their philosophy of learning through play together with the full involvement of parents.

Organisation of the Menai Bridge Group was informal, being run largely by the supervisor, secretary and treasurer. A more formal structure developed and I found myself chairman. I did not appreciate then that my early involvement with Menai Bridge Playgroup would lead me into a rapidly developing organisation that would be a big part of my life for the next twenty years.

The Menai Bridge Playgroup had early on joined the National Association of Pre-school Playgroups that had been formed in 1962 but we had little contact initially with other groups in our area, which had been developing in similar ways to ours. We started getting together – Benllech, Beaumaris, Holyhead – for informal meetings. Then, inspired by visits from members from Denbighshire and Flintshire, who were far ahead of us, we set up the Anglesey Branch, appointed Veronica Hanson as our Area Organiser and negotiated successfully for a grant from the Local Education Authority. Visits from Brenda Crowe and Maude Henderson, PPA's two National Advisers, helped us to feel that we were part of an increasingly important National Organisation.

With Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 the new County of Gwynedd replaced the old Counties of Anglesey, Caernarvonshire and Merioneth and the former Branches in that area joined to become the Gwynedd County Association.

We were growing and learning a lot from each other. We also met regularly with the Clwyd County Association, formerly Denbigh, Flintshire and Wrexham. North Wales and South Wales Associations were also established and we now had links across Wales. About the same time Wales had its first representative on the National Executive Committee of PPA in London. This was Marjorie Dykins who was an inspiration to all of us in Wales and through her we learnt a great deal about PPA nationally. We were now also meeting members of staff in the Welsh Office in Cardiff and the Under Secretary of State for Wales in his office in Whitehall. From my tentative arrival in Menai Bridge Playgroup I, with my colleagues, was now negotiating with Government on behalf of PPA in Wales. The first grant from the Welsh Office was awarded in 1973 and enabled the appointment



Myfanwy (Tempest Ltd)

of our first National Adviser. This was Myfanwy Edwards who had worked in the Social Work section of the Welsh Office. She set up an office in Newport and appointed Yvonne Hern as her Secretary. Myfanwy travelled all over Wales and those playgroups in the more remote parts began to feel that they belonged to a national movement.

Myfanwy retired in 1976 and Marjorie Dykins was then appointed National Adviser. This was a splendid appointment. Marjorie worked tirelessly; she had a wider view than the rest of

us of the significance of PPA and its importance in the lives of young children and their families. She was completely committed and without her Wales PPA would not have grown and developed as it did.

By the mid 1970s PPA in Wales was becoming a Regional organisation. Some Regions in England had already set up their own Regional structures and many of us considered that Wales should do the same, especially as Wales had its own source of funding. In 1975 a meeting was held in Llandrindod Wells, attended by members from all over Wales and by the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the NEC. We had thought that at this meeting it would be decided to set up a Wales Region of PPA but some of us, including myself, were persuaded that Wales was not ready – I am very ashamed of myself for this decision. However, the following year, in 1976, the Wales Region was formed and, although not independent, PPA in Wales had much more autonomy; this made a lot of sense as Wales, funded by the Welsh Office, was developing in its own individual way.

A Wales Regional Council, composed of representatives from all the Counties in Wales, was set up and took the major decisions relating to PPA

in Wales. Sub-committees had existed prior to this but were now formally established – Finance, Training, Personnel, Special Needs, Legal and Constitutional. The Regional Council met for two days three times a year and a great deal was accomplished. The work on Regional Council was new to us and we were learning all the time, things that seem simple now like drawing up agendas, keeping minutes, making sure that decisions were correctly made and carried out. The Chairmen of the various sub-committees became experts in their different fields. We had had different experiences in our previous working lives and everyone had something to give. Apart from the work of Council we had a great deal of fun and because we stayed overnight for meetings we got to know each other very well and many of us are still friends.

We continued to meet with members of the Welsh Office and our grant was increasing each year. This enabled Development Officers to be appointed for different parts of Wales. There were three part-time Development Officers at first who each covered a large part of Wales but an increased grant enabled us later to appoint eight full-time officers, one for each County in Wales. The office in Newport was retained but we were able to open the Regional Office in Wrexham. An enormous amount had been achieved so that when PPA in Wales decided to become an independent organisation in 1987 a highly sophisticated structure was in place.