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CPL Podcast: The Making of a Teacher: Starting Out in 1911

Host: Carly Boreland

INTRODUCTION:
You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:
Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. In this episode, we have something special for you and a little bit different. We're bringing you a voice from the past. The voice of Beatrice Taylor.

Her recording was uncovered recently by our wonderful Teachers Federation Library. Beatrice started teaching in 1911. She was just 17 years old and was given just six week's training before taking her first class. Sadly, much of the recording is lost and we begin here with Beatrice reflecting on the first class that she taught in 1911, and then moving to the Paddington School in 1916. And she talks about both the opportunities and hardships brought about for young women like her by the First World War.

Folks, Beatrice's days were hard. They were harder than any school days I have experienced, and I feel really fortunate to be bringing her words and her times to you now. Beatrice was born in 1893 and she passed away in 1982. She died before I was born, and she lived and she taught in times that I can never know except through books, and pictures, and stories, and film. Our regular listeners would know already that I'm a high school History teacher. I absolutely adore this episode and Beatrice's story and I hope that you might appreciate it too. I'll be back at the end of this recording to let you know how you can find out more about Beatrice and about our library as well.

[MUSIC FADES IN AND THEN OUT – RECORDING PLAYS]

Beatrice Taylor:
And I left Sydney High and went to Crown Street and I was trained in the handling of a class there. There were no formal lessons given. They just handled a class in front of the headmistress and the headmaster of Crown Street and we went down and observed them teaching. That's all. We observed. That was all the training we had.

Female Interviewer:
And how long did this training so-called take?

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Beatrice Taylor:
It seemed to me about six weeks - may have been eight weeks - and then we were appointed to teach. I received an appointment to proceed to Parramatta infants and I went to Parramatta infants and I was given a class in a room with an older teacher. But I was given no guidance and no assistance. I was given a class - like hundreds of other young women, I was 17 at the time - and you were just told to teach it.

Female Interviewer:
Were you given any guidance at all on how to teach them?

Beatrice Taylor:
No.

Female Interviewer:
Or what to teach them?

Beatrice Taylor:
No. The only guidance-- we knew what we had to teach them. But we had to make our own programs and we had no book provided. So, we took a ruled foolscap and made a cover for it of unruled foolscap because I couldn't afford out of my very small salary of 60 pounds a year to buy a bit of cardboard to make a cover. So, we manufactured our own programs. Then we had to fill it in. And that got the approval of the headmistress or the disapproval.

Female Interviewer:
Well, as a girl of 17 with your first class of children, almost untrained, I guess - you hadn't left your school yourself for very long - what did it feel like? Can you remember?

Beatrice Taylor:
I felt delighted. The children were absolutely gorgeous.

Female Interviewer:
You still remember them?

Beatrice Taylor:
I could name them.

Female Interviewer:
This was in 1911. You could--?

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Beatrice Taylor:
Yes.

Female Interviewer:
And you could name the kids you taught then?

Beatrice Taylor:
Gwen Thomas, Mabel Cox, Linda Penfold, Laurel Riddlestone, Ted Hill. I can see them all so plainly.

Female Interviewer:
And how old were these kids then?

Beatrice Taylor:
They were second class in the infants. They were little kids of six and seven. They were really delightful. That was the compensation. And they were as enthusiastic as I was, and I think young children are the ideal to teach because they're really very important in those years. And I really enjoyed the teaching. But it was old gallery seats and there was another teacher in the room with me. I was talking against another teacher all day. But she was beside me, not opposite to me. And that was an introduction to many years of teaching in a room with another teacher. That was one of the worst features. And I realised very, very deeply that it was very important to have good conditions under which to work. It was as important as a good salary.

Female Interviewer:
It must have been quite a skill involved keeping the attention of kids when somebody else was talking in the room.

Beatrice Taylor:
It was. It paid tremendous demands on you. I was physically tired at the end of each day, physically tired. And I was so enthusiastic, I didn't mind what I did. I was half actress, half artist. I was everything. We had the old blackboards on the easels, you know? And I really was so enthusiastic, I don't think anything would have made me say, "I can't do it."

Female Interviewer:
So, you used to do quite a lot of physical activity while you were teaching?

Beatrice Taylor:
Yes. Up and down these gallery steps. And mid-June, they decided to separate the rooms and give each teacher a room. But they only put glass partitions in, so you didn't get away from another teacher then

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because there was always a teacher watching you through a glass partition. So, while they were putting the glass partitions in, they put me in an open weather shed to teach, and through mid-winter. And I remember the old teacher with whom I'd been teaching, she was also put in a weather shed. It was bitterly cold, and the floor of the weather shed was raised and the boards were all uneven with cracks between them. And I remember the teacher saying to the headmaster, Mr. Campleigh, when he came up to see how we were getting on, she said, "You stand there and see how you'd like the wind blowing up your trousers." I didn't know where her trousers were because the skirts were long. Whether she had a-- because we didn't wear slacks or anything like that. But I managed to get congestion of the lungs and she got influenza. But if you hadn't been teaching - I think the period was three months - you had no sick leave. So, for that period, I had congestion of the lungs, I got no salary because I hadn't been teaching long enough to entitle me to a salary.

Female Interviewer:
Even in spite of the fact that the conditions of teaching is what gave you congestion of the lungs?

Beatrice Taylor:
Yes. That didn't come into it. And it's from Parramatta I was moved to the Northern Rivers, to a little place called Tinnanbar. And there, I taught in the same room as the headmaster. It was a two-teacher school. The headmaster and one assistant. I had all the infants in the first class and the primary and he had the rest. He was a severe disciplinarian but not cruel. I thought he was very severe when I first went there, but I realised the man had been up against it for a long time. Then, I went from Tinnanbar to Pitt Town, and there, I again taught in a room with a headmaster who was Irish and extremely witty. And he had a tremendous sense of justice and he was very kind, and I enjoyed my life with him.

Female Interviewer:
When you were moved from place to place like that, did the education department provide accommodation for you?

Beatrice Taylor:
No. We found our own accommodation. We got our travelling expenses. But we found our own accommodation. And I was very fortunate I found good accommodation and I got on well with the people. I was a member of a big family and I think that was a good training for fitting in with ordinary families.

Female Interviewer:
And where did you find accommodation? Usually with private families?

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Beatrice Taylor:
Always with a private family. You couldn't afford anything else. After Pitt Town, I went to Galston. And there, I had a separate room, but the headmaster looked through a glass partition at me. And my enthusiasm didn't wain. It was still so keen that by the end of the first year, I decided to make a Christmas pudding for the children. And I used my mother's recipe and it contained 10 eggs, so it was a pretty big pudding. And one of the parents sent me along a piece of holly. The parents were interested so I must have interested the children because the parents were interested. And one of the fathers sent a piece of holly to go on top of the pudding. And every child had a stir. It was a wonderful experience and we had this wonderful Christmas pudding on the break-up.

Female Interviewer:
You must have been teaching then when World War I began?

Beatrice Taylor:
Yes. I was appointed to Paddington. And there, the horror really began. I had to teach in a room, the two classes were back to back and I talked all day looking at another teacher. She talked, and I talked. And whoever told the better yarn got the bigger audience. So, it was a case of-- it was very, very difficult. And that room, we could hear every tram going by. We could hear traffic in Oxford Street, hear the trams going by, could hear the conductor sing out. Talk against, one teacher against another all day. It was very, very difficult. And when you came to anything where you had to explain it and to demand the close attention of the children or to-- well, the only thing was to involve them, and they were certainly involved because they had to be, or they'd have learnt nothing. But that was very, very difficult. The conditions really were very, very poor in many of the schools at that time.

Female Interviewer:
It must have taught them how to concentrate? Taught the kids how to concentrate?

Beatrice Taylor:
No. I think it taught them how to be cunning. They'd keep their eye on you. Children are smart. They can find a way of dodging restrictions. They were lovely I'll tell you. They used to sing very nicely. And I enjoyed the musical hour. But it was very exhausting to work all day opposite another teacher. Ever since then, I'm so firmly convinced that the importance of conditions under which people worked are every bit as important if not more so than salaries. Salaries are important because you can't live without a decent salary. But also conditions. The conditions were very poor -- and there were hundreds of them teaching under those conditions. And there were also women in small schools who were sent into very lonely places. I don't think people today realise the number of young women who taught in small schools in the loneliest part of the country. I had a sister who taught at Tumorrama, way up near

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Tumut. And she had a little room in a separate paddock to the house the family in which she was boarding. She had to walk across to that every night.

Female Interviewer:
Was she teaching by herself in that sort of--?

Beatrice Taylor:
Yes, in a small school. Another sister taught down near Albury. And they were great winemakers at that time. And where she had to board, the man was a heavy wine drinker. And because it had rather terrified her, but it was amazing. See, necessity drives and after all these girls who all had to live - and there were many of them - they were up against big odds. They weren't adequately trained. They weren't unintelligent, or they'd never have gone through. They learned and adapted themselves to a remarkable degree. I think they were really remarkable women.

Female Interviewer:
Were they mainly women teaching then?

Beatrice Taylor:
Well, I couldn't tell you what percentages but there were certainly a great number of them. But no women in boys' schools then. In 1914, the first world war broke out when I was sent to Paddington, and the women were then being placed in the boys' departments and they fairly invaded the boys' departments because they were appointed there. They used to have empire days and special efforts and the mayor of the town, or the mayor of the district, or the mayor of municipality usually came and made a long and dreary speech. And they could have learned a little bit from some of the kiddies I think. The children kept me very reticent. We used to stand at the end and keep our eye on the ones we thought were a bit troublesome. I remember one mayor - I won't say what municipality - used to come along and give us the leading article out of the Sydney Morning Herald and you would know how interesting that'd be to little boys.

Female Interviewer:
When the war finished, what happened? Did they go back to teaching girls?

Beatrice Taylor:
No, they stayed in the boys' schools. I stayed in Paddington boys school for years. I was there for years after the war ended. But there was no avenue for promotion in a boys' school for a woman. So that if you wanted promotion, you went into a girls school. And I had from the moment I started to teach, sat for examinations to qualify for a higher grade. So, when I wanted a promotion, I transferred into a girls'

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department, and then there, I'd took further examinations and wrote my thesis and qualified for a higher-- for finally for headmistressship.

Female Interviewer:
What qualification did you wind up with after all these exams?

Beatrice Taylor:
It was a 1B, which was equivalent to a BA plus a diploma of education. Just to a BA would not have given me the headmistressship. So, I wrote my thesis at the education department and we had to write them under duress. We weren't given time to write them. We prepared them, we were given so long to write them. Two days and we then did a written paper on the subject, and we did them under duress with an inspector sitting in the room. You were never free from supervision. See, that made our work harder because as well as teaching, we were also studying. And if you were an enthusiastic teacher, you didn't neglect your teaching. You loved the teaching and the study. I always liked reading so I didn't find the study difficult. But it meant that you worked all day, you prepared your work and you corrected. You never let anything go because you were closely supervised. And the annual inspection was something that was really an inspection. They looked at everything. They went through everything with a very, very critical eye. But you were prepared for the annual inspection because you got your teaching mark on that.

Female Interviewer:
Did you ever get involved in the communities where you were teaching in community activities?

Beatrice Taylor:
Not to a great extent, no. Until Teachers Federation was concerned. I became very involved with that and I realised the necessity for it. The salaries were very poor and the conditions in many cases were poorly, and the size of the classes. I had a class of 72 given to me. You were confronted with a class of 72. And when I complained about it, they took the three best away.

Female Interviewer:
You became quite active in the Teachers Federation?

Beatrice Taylor:
Yes, I was active in the Teachers Federation. And, in fact, I was a foundation member and I was a delegate to the first federation conference in 1919. I was a delegate and I've been a delegate ever since until I retired.

[RECORDING ENDS]

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Carly Boreland:
Beatrice had a fascinating life and hers is just one of many stories in the Teachers Federation's library's oral history collection. And it's also part of a new book which is called *On the Voices* about women in Teachers Federation history. 2018 marks the centenary of the Teachers Federation and to find out more about that, you can visit the Federation's website.

This episode is part of the Centre for Professional Learning's online collection of teacher professional development as part of the Journal of Professional Learning and the JPL Podcast. The Centre for Professional Learning offers courses and conferences for members of the Federation to attend and the JPL is available online as a journal for reading and also a series of podcasts for listening. Find out more about all of the Centre for Professional Learning and the JPL by visiting our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:
The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.