

PRE-SCHOOL PLAYGROUPS: A Handbook.

Joyce Lucas and Anne Henderson
London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 231pp.
Reviewed by Deborah Brennan.

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PRE - SCHOOL PLAYGROUPS: A HANDBOOK will tell you everything you want to know about English playgroups (perhaps more!). However, it is not entirely appropriate for Australian conditions. Playgroups in England seem to be much closer to the "formal" end of service provision than their counterparts here. They employ trained staff, meet up to five times per week and are far more structured than Australian playgroups. In most parts of Australia playgroups are very informal gatherings of parents and children and no paid staff are employed. Mothers are obliged to stay with their children throughout the session because child welfare regulations in this country make it illegal for groups of children to be cared for in unlicensed premises.

The values underlying Pre-School Playgroups are highly conservative and there seems to be little recognition of the enormous social and economic changes which have transformed family life in recent decades. For example it is claimed (p.18) that children need a father who is the main breadwinner and a mother who (although she may have a part-time job) is basically devoted to rearing her children. No evidence is put forward to back the claim that this extremely recent form of family organization in any way meets the needs of family members - this is simply assumed. Nor is there any discussion of the fact that this family form is rapidly dwindling partly due to the current recession and partly because women are seeking more from life than years of housework and child care.

Chapter 6 on "The Growth of the Child from Birth to 5 Years" also makes some enormous and unwarranted assumptions. It is premised on the idea that every child is a wanted child and is born into a two-parent household with comfortable material circumstances and a mother devoted to staying at home attending to the child's wants. It refers the reader only to the most conservative theorists and ignores all the recent literature by mothers themselves on the conditions of their lives.

One great strength of the book is the excellent view it takes of the need which young children have to meet and play with other children. The authors argue



that "We have created a society which has robbed children of certain basic rights; in particular we have not given them a safe place in which to play with companions of their own age" (9p.4). "Many children . . . lead isolated lives, hemmed in by adults, seeing their own age group only in shops or other public places where there is no time or space to play" (9p.7). Unfortunately however the book does not give much attention to services other than playgroup which might meet these needs (such as day care centres) and presents children's needs as being in conflict with the needs of adults who wish to devote themselves to things besides their children's care.

This publication may be of interest to those who are interested in the organisation of children's services in other countries but if you are interested in finding out how to start a playgroup or are looking for play or craft ideas then Australian publications such as *Totline* or the material put out by the Victorian Playgroups Association would be far more useful.



SYDNEY:

A Social & Political Atlas

M. Poulsen & P. Spearritt
George Allen & Unwin, 1981

Reviewed by B. Lepani

One of the primary functions of this atlas is to provide socio-economic information about the population of the Sydney Metropolitan area in a manner that is readily accessible to the researcher concerned with practical policy matters, as well as the more complex theoretical concerns of the academic researcher.

What the atlas demonstrates again and again is the importance of spatial politics in large urban areas. Where a person lives and works in a large city creates either

benefits or disbenefits in addition to that deriving from income and educational level, the two major determinants of social class. What this means is that market forces will tend to ensure that those locations which confer benefits such as access to employment, access to public transport, and access to environmental goods such as clean air, passive recreation resources and protection from noise, will be monopolised by those with purchasing power.

By examining the distribution of these urban public goods, it is possible to conclude that a low income person living in Leichhardt is considerably better off than one living in Liverpool, if the factor of housing cost is set aside. Thus while it is true that spatially based interventions by public policy, to say induce more employment to Liverpool, will not solve the problem of class based social inequality, it will nevertheless ameliorate the spatial disbenefits that result from the allocative processes of the urban economy.

The record of public policy interventions to achieve this sort of amelioration has not been impressive. Environmental planning remains divorced from economic planning, still in its infancy in New South Wales.

The commentary in the atlas conscientiously alludes to feminist critiques of economic analysis that excluded the domestic sphere (the home management and social reproduction sector, perhaps?) but fails to really draw any conclusions in terms of urban public policy.

One hopes the people of Sydney take note of the map on the 1978 state election (which of course needs updating) and learns the lesson of reactive government, the only way to get political bargaining power is to become a marginal seat. SYDNEY: A SOCIAL & POLITICAL ATLAS is a useful tool for anyone concerned with urban public policy and a desire to match public resources with social need. The atlas graphically demonstrates how far we fall short of this, and is therefore a useful political tool for that brave band of planners, economists and sociologists etc. who struggle to keep the goal of equity alive in public policy.