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MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN THE KINDERGARTEN



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A multi-cultural education program has been followed in the Augusta Park Kindergarten for the past six months, with such pleasing results that, if introduced in all kindergartens, it could reduce the misunderstandings arising out of ignorance in a multi-cultural environment. This program was based on similar courses in Scandinavia, Germany, the U.S.S.R., Canada and New Zealand, all combined and adapted to the situation in Port Augusta and the Australian situation generally. The basic idea was for the learning to be a two-way process between the Euro-Australian children and the two dominant cultural groups, the Aboriginal and Italian children.

The morning session of the kindergarten was divided into two groups, one learning Pitjantjatjara language and culture, while the other group learnt Italian language and culture. The Euro-Australian children were divided into two groups determined by which 'appealed' most, and in which group they had friends. The parents were also interviewed to further establish into which groups to place the children. Most wanted to learn Pitjantjatjara, but two groups were finally established. Throughout this program parents have been involved, and in some cases have contributed considerably to the language course by correcting pronunciation and conversational expressions, as well as adding colour to the cultural aspects of the program.

This program arose out of the situation of the presence of a large Aboriginal minority group, and a significant Italian community in Port Augusta. Following the pattern of similar communities, many of these children commence school with a poor knowledge of English, as well as having inhibitions about their race or culture. By offering such a program to Australian children as well as to the Aboriginal and Italian children, a sound foundation of mutual respect will be given at an impressionable age which, hopefully, will not only give the migrant and Aboriginal children pride in their language and culture, but lead the Australian children to a more enlightened attitude toward Aboriginal and migrant children. Such a course involves a two-way process in which both groups of children help each other with the

result that the migrant or Aboriginal child gains a greater knowledge of English without losing his own language and feeling of worth in the Australian way of life.

At Augusta Park Kindergarten we have had the voluntary assistance of the president of the Port Augusta Branch of the Italian-Australian Association to help with the Italian course, and for the Aboriginal Pitjantjatjara course, help has been given by some Aboriginal teachers' aides who are native Pitjantjatjara speakers. The children in the Italian program responded very well and enjoyed the sessions with Mr. Duregon. Also, one of the Aboriginal aides from the pre-pre-school at the Aboriginal Social Club has spent several mornings assisting the children generally in other kindergarten activities. Furthermore, the Pitjantjatjara group has had exchange visits with the Aboriginal pre-pre-school on a number of occasions. On one of these visits, mothers of the Euro-Australian children accompanied their children and found the morning very interesting and enjoyable, as they not only observed the pre-pre-school activities, but also were shown around the Aboriginal Social Club and its many other activities.

The Italian section of this program involves Italian conversation, general expressions, (enough to give the children an idea of language patterns), various games to recapitulate learning, matching cards, placing cards in correct places according to directions in Italian, as well as Italian story books suitable for this age group. For the Italian migrant child, English is used periodically so that the course generally alternates between Italian and English. Italian folk music and handcrafts as well as songs and picture discussions add to the program. On one occasion the children were treated to spaghetti and cheese which they enjoyed.

The Pitjantjatjara course follows much the same pattern of conversation and expressions to give an idea of the patterns of this language. The same types of games are played to recapitulate learning, and, as in the Italian course, picture flash cards are used constantly. In this program the children learn about the many material crafts developed by the Aboriginal people and why, as well as why they followed the life style they did. Many of the stories, records and tapes of music from children's corroborees, songs and legends were obtained from local sources.* The different art styles experienced by the children include sand and rock painting. Picture discussions and little talks by Aboriginal children add to the cultural aspect of the course. The children spend about ten minutes a day in these

* also from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

language groups, and on some occasions spend up to twenty minutes in discussion groups, or in listening to records or viewing slides.

The parents of both the Aboriginal children and the Italian children have taken an overwhelming interest in the program and the general activities of the kindergarten, and often spend a morning just helping. Initially, mothers who needed assistance in gaining confidence in mastering the English language were helped incidentally during the morning, but the numbers and constant interruptions meant that greater progress was made by meeting in their homes out of kindergarten hours.

Research in Europe and North America has shown that children who are bi-lingual perform better academically than mono-lingual children. This is because the child gains a greater understanding of language as such and hence understands his own language better - its complexities, downfalls, attributes and its general contribution as a medium of communication.

Sometimes the above program combines all three cultures, and this helps the migrant and Aboriginal children to gain an understanding of each other - the oldest and newest Australians. The greatest problem was in building up a supply of a variety of material suitable for this age group. As far as can be ascertained, South Australia is the only State where this multi-cultural program is practised at the kindergarten level except in special Aboriginal kindergartens.

BACK ISSUES

Readers are advised that Vol.1 No.1 has been reprinted, and is obtainable on request.

Other back issues are also available with the exception of Vol.1 Nos. 2, 3 and 4, many of which were unfortunately destroyed in the January flood last year.
