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PARA-PROFESSIONALS

AT THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE, ATHLONE*

Ann Short

The important roles played by the Aboriginal Teacher-aides in our schools have been discussed in previous issues by Wayne Dyer. In the following article, Ann Short writes about the involvement of para-professionals in three separate programs at the Early Learning Centre, Athlone, South Africa.

BACKGROUND

The employment of para-professionals in pre-school facilities serving the Coloured people¹ in greater Cape Town is a widespread practice because of the acute shortage of trained personnel, yet there is no general recognition of the potential value of their contribution and therefore little attention is paid to devising appropriate training programmes for them. The only type of training available to Coloured people in the pre-school field is a two-year course for nursery school teachers, which is primarily concerned with the education of children aged three to six years. The only small college for Coloured students in South Africa turns out some 15 teachers per year in a total population of just over 2 million. The estimated pre-school population in the Cape Town area alone is 90,000 children. A recent survey has shown that there are only about 40 qualified teachers employed in some 85 pre-school centres in this area.

Although the Early Learning Centre could probably fill all its posts with professional staff because it is in a position to offer reasonably good salaries, para-professionals have been involved in the project since it started. The reasons are:

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* Reproduced from the *Bernard van Leer Foundation Newsletter* 16.

1. In the South African context, the Coloured people who are of mixed descent, from a separate 'population group'.

.. it is Early Learning Centre employment policy to give preference to Coloured people;

.. because of the limited opportunities to gain secondary and tertiary education, vast numbers of Coloured women have not been able to develop their work potential.

By offering employment and training, the Early Learning Centre hopes to assist some of these women to develop skills which will allow them to make a positive contribution to their community by helping to educate its children.

The ELC¹ has involved para-professionals in three different types of programmes:

.. as full-time care-givers of infants and very young children in the ELC's creche (creche-aides);

.. in a teacher-aide training programme concerned with the education of two to six year old children;

.. as part-time home visitors in our Home Early Learning Programme for very young children and their mothers.

Each programme will be described separately.

THE CRECHE-AIDES

The creche-unit is divided into two sections: the infant section, which caters for fifteen children aged six months to two years, is staffed by three creche-aides and a nursing sister (who also attends to the health needs of all the other children in the Centre), while the other section, which caters for fifteen children aged two to three years (juniors), is staffed by a qualified teacher and a para-professional aide. These four creche-aides are ordinary members of the local community and two have children attending the Centre. They range in age from 25 to 39 years;

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1. Early Learning Centre.

they each have between six and eight years of schooling (out of a possible twelve years of school education) and the only one with any experience of working with children had completed our teacher-aide training course before being employed at the ELC. This small group has proved to be one of the most stable sections of the ELC staff.

The three women who work in the infant section are each responsible for the daily care and education of five infants. Since we started to develop a special educational programme for the infants in June 1974, they have participated in weekly meetings with the supervisor (a qualified nursery teacher responsible for the organisation of the teaching staff in the Centre and for in-service training) and nursing sister (training); they have successfully implemented the programme; and they have kept simple records of the children's progress. They have always been exposed to a certain amount of on-the-job training by the ELC supervisor, but they responded enthusiastically to this more intensified training programme in 1974 and there was a definite increase in their self-esteem. They have also participated very effectively in a meeting with parents where they were required to demonstrate and explain the purpose of various educational toys. An observation study of caregiver behaviour in 1973 will be followed up in order to evaluate the effectiveness of our training programme.

The para-professional in the junior section works with the teacher and thus receives constant on-the-job training. Although the teacher handles the more specialised aspects of the educational programme, both the teacher and the aide have been attending regular weekly discussions with the supervisor since July 1974 and we plan to involve the aide more and more in the educational process. Thus far, she has responded very well to training; when the teacher was on leave earlier this year, she maintained the general routine and atmosphere in the junior section without any outside assistance.

In South Africa, there is no specialised training course for creche personnel who care for children of less than three years. Once we have developed our infant and junior creche programmes, we hope to be able to offer some kind of training programme (probably in-service) to other para-professionals working in this field.

THE TEACHER-AIDES

The development of our training programme for teacher-aides, which is the result of an attempt to involve mothers more directly in the education of their children at the ELC, illustrates a number of problems and issues relating to the indirect involvement of para-professionals.

Soon after the Centre opened in 1972, we invited mothers who were not working to spend time in the classroom helping the teachers. However, after their first few visits, these mothers tended to stop coming and we found ourselves agreeing with Auerbach and Roche that:

'It is not enough for the teachers to provide the model for parents to follow in guiding and teaching the children. The need to put into words not only *what* teacher-aides should do but *why* they do it'.¹

In September 1972 we began again with a more systematic pilot project. The eleven mothers who joined the programme agreed to spend four hours a week in the classroom on a regular basis and to attend a group discussion once every two weeks. Timetables were drawn up so that each mother was attached to a particular teacher (rotated), while the lunch-time group discussions on nursery school practice were led by the principal and the supervisor and attended by two teachers on a rota basis. The pilot project proved successful with some of the participating mothers, but we concluded that it is neither realistic nor fair to expect mothers from hard-pressed backgrounds to participate in such a programme out of interest only and on a purely voluntary basis.

We then conceived of the teacher-aide programme as providing a training course for para-professionals with relatively low educational qualifications. We also decided to give a small financial remuneration for time spent in the classroom since the mothers do provide the Centre with valuable service. The teacher-aides were also given a badge to wear. Some of the 1972 Kew Town

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1. A.B. Auerbach and S. Roche. *Creating a Pre-school Centre*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York, 1971.

mothers stayed on in the programme in 1973, but real impetus was given for its development when five women from a neighbouring housing estate, Bontheuwel, asked to join, as they had plans to open a nursery school in their church hall with the help of a trained teacher. Since the Bontheuwel group tended to have a higher level of education (approximately ten years of schooling) than the Kew Town mothers and had a specific objective, separate discussion-groups were run by the supervisor for the two groups.

The Bontheuwel group, which was joined by a teacher's wife, completed a six month's course in September 1973, while six Kew Town mothers 'graduated' in February 1974. Eight of the twelve women who joined the programme in 1974, completed the course which had been revamped and extended to run the full school year. The 1974 group included local women and 'outsiders', but the general level of education was relatively high (approximately eight years of schooling). The 1975 group of fourteen women is very mixed: seven from Kew Town and seven others, of whom three are working as para-professionals in other pre-school centres and two are Indians; they range in age from about 20 to 55 years and in education from no schooling to ten years of schooling. Despite the fact that the teacher-aide groups have tended to be very heterogeneous with great variation in educational levels, age and to a lesser extent, in social class, we have not found this to be a major problem.

There does not seem to be any marked relationship between age of schooling and practical competence as teacher-aides. Our aim has always been to involve the aides in teaching roles rather than in merely doing chores, and we have found that the aides can perform useful educational functions in the classroom. Personality factors and physical fitness are much more important in determining competence. On the whole, we have found that after the first few months, the group stabilises and the aides develop a high degree of involvement and are always willing to help out when teachers are ill, or on special occasions such as excursions.

Nevertheless, certain problems and issues have emerged:

Firstly, nursery school teachers have indicated certain reservations about training para-professionals, which seem to stem mainly from their own feelings of insecurity as professionals. Some of our own teachers have shown a reluctance to become involved in the programme; one of the problems is that some of the younger teachers find it difficult to direct older women.

Secondly, although most of the twenty women who have completed the course have found employment in the pre-school field, we have been concerned about the fact that they have had difficulty obtaining work in nursery schools. The reason for this is not clear, but it has meant that most of our teacher-aides have found employment in situations where there is little or no professional guidance. This was one of the reasons for extending the training course. Related to this is the problem of developing realistic expectations in the para-professionals about their own level of competence. While we are convinced that para-professionals can be competent aides to qualified teachers, we are concerned about those who have more ambitious plans, such as starting 'community-based pre-school centres' with little professional guidance and financial backing, because we feel committed to ensuring high quality care for pre-school children in any project which has connections with the ELC.

A third problem is the exceptionally low salaries offered to para-professionals in pre-school centres. We plan to assist our teacher-aides to establish a cohesive group which can press for better salaries and working conditions.

THE HOME VISITORS

The main objective of the Home Early Learning Programme is to work with and through the mother to promote the intellectual, social, emotional and physical development of her child(ren), i.e. to help the mother to provide a more adequate and stimulating learning environment within the home itself. In the initial pilot programme, one of our social workers was the only home visitor, but our plan was to expand the programme gradually by training para-professionals as home visitors.

At the beginning of 1974, the ELC employed two para-professionals on a part-time basis. A five week pre-service training workshop, which dealt with both the theoretical and practical aspects of the programme, was conducted by professionals from the ELC and a similar project run by another organisation which was embarking on a home-based programme with four para-professional home visitors. Unfortunately this project collapsed at the end of 1974 and one of the ELC home visitors had to leave. However, the para-professionals had proved to be very competent home visitors and so the ELC decided to expand the programme again in 1975. Of the four new home visitors, three had completed our teacher-aide

programme in 1974. Our voluntary co-ordinator (a psychologist) and the supervisor (a qualified teacher) of the home programme conducted a two week pre-service training course along the lines of the first before embarking on the implementation of the 1975 programme with sixty mother-child pairs (the children ranged in age from nine to thirty months).

The five home visitors range in age from 39 to 51 years and they each have seven or eight years of schooling. Three of them live in local housing estates but they all tend to have slightly higher socio-economic status than the average Kew Town woman. They each work with between ten and twelve mother-child pairs which they helped to recruit earlier in the year. The visitor spends about one hour per week with each mother-child pair, demonstrating activities and games to the mother. She evaluates each visit in terms of a detailed questionnaire and discusses progress and plans in a weekly supervision session. In-service training of the visitors is also conducted by means of regular group discussions with the supervisor and co-ordinator.

The team-spirit and commitment among the home visitors is excellent. Although they are employed on a part-time (20-hour week) basis, they all give much more of their time to the programme. They have established good rapport with their families and have developed considerable insight into their roles as home visitors. The only problems which have emerged are relatively minor: difficulty in expressing themselves in writing and lack of transport.

Despite the fact that the para-professional home visitors have only been involved with the ELC for a short time, we are confident of their success. As a result of experience, we feel that the ELC could make a very positive contribution towards improving pre-school education facilities by training para-professional home visitors and professional supervisors to implement home-based programmes in other projects.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The para-professionals who have been involved in ELC programmes have tended to be middle-aged women from working class backgrounds with about seven or eight years of schooling. On the whole, they have been responsive to training, they have shown a high degree of commitment to their work; and they have proved competent in the roles assigned to them. A major factor in their

positive response has been an increase in self-esteem which the involvement has brought with it. However, this does not seem to have changed their relationship with the local community, with which they have established good rapport. We have also found that the para-professionals are much less inhibited in discussions with high-level professional staff in the project than are the teachers.

The above remarks apply without exception to the para-professionals who are employed by the ELC; the creche-aides, teacher-aides and home visitors. It should be pointed out that these women were not selected from a large number of applicants, and in the teacher-aide programme we have accepted *all* applicants thus far. I think we are justified in concluding that, in the particular circumstances prevailing in the Coloured communities of greater Cape Town, para-professionals can fill valuable educational roles under the guidance of professionals in the field of pre-school education.

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A second article in the same Newsletter also focuses on para-professionals and brings out additional issues.

PARENTS AS PARA-PROFESSIONALS IN THE HAARLEM PRE-SCHOOL PROJECT

Peter Elbers

BACKGROUND

The origins of this project stemmed from the convictions of a group of parents who believed in the importance of pre-school education and parental involvement in it for the future school careers of their children. This may have been long accepted by some sections of the community who have made the