



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

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.

.....

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

effort to provide a stimulating environment for their young children, but it is by no means as common a view among working class people who may have had little education themselves. The level of wages, the time available, the cultural patterns of the family, their own school experience and expectations for their children are all important factors in determining people's attitudes towards pre-schooling.

An analysis of the incomes of parents who have participated or who are now participating in the Jan Dobberschool, indicates that there are approximately equal numbers from the lower income groups and middle/high income groups. This is in fact the target which the school had aimed for. Factors influencing this distribution are the costs per family, the recruitment of low wage earners by word of mouth and the establishment of the school in a predominantly low wage-earning area. It is likely that the division reflects the social structure of the area but exact figures are not available. Income does not seem to affect the degree of willingness to participate; it depends rather on the inclinations of individual parents. Those who do not wish to do so tend not to come forward; the children of high wage earners in this category go to the traditional, expensive pre-school day centres and those of low wage earners remain at home. Those in the latter category who do come forward may be indifferent to the idea of participation initially but come to the school because there are no financial obstacles, because their friends are there, and because they believe that somehow the experiences at this school will benefit their children and themselves. It is usually found that the high wage earners are already highly motivated to participate because otherwise they would simply send their children to other schools.

From the outset, the issue of social justice had been an important one for the school; so too was the issue of opportunities lost when the learning potential of young children and their parents is not given sufficient attention. Participation on the part of parents from all socio-economic groups was therefore vitally important. But full participation had to be seen as a goal to strive for rather than an immediate possibility. The learning experience of the parents contributes towards the realisation of that aim and it also has an important function in the process of emancipation of certain socio-economic groups.

It is essential to realise that in grasping the opportunities for development by the school, the parents commit themselves to a process which must continue beyond the confines of the school when their children are ready to leave. Participation in the school by the para-professionals is, by its nature, temporary.

Thus the school can be defined as one of a series of learning settings for both children and parents. The school sees its role as concerned with the learning development of children and parents but it also has an important task in trying to assess the effects on the children, parents and professional teachers, of the participation by parents as para-professionals in every aspect of the school's management and functioning.

The school itself consists of a number of small groups in which children aged from 2½ to 4 years are exposed to a stimulating playing/learning environment organised by professional teachers, who are themselves local parents. The parents (mother and often fathers) participate in the work of the classroom as para-professional assistants for a minimum of one session every two weeks on a rota basis.

OBJECTIVES IN RELATION TO PARA-PROFESSIONALS

The development of a positive attitude towards participation in the school.

This has been achieved when the following qualities are displayed: taking initiative with the children; acceptance of the monitoring by professional teachers; discussion with other participants of what must be done in class; alterations in parent's behaviour towards their own children as a result of their experiences in the school.

The development of social and technical skills.

Technical skills include the ability to work with the teaching materials used in the school, such as puzzles, colour and form distinction toys and learning games, and also the ability to encourage the constructive use of climbing and jumping equipment in the classroom.

Social skills cover the areas of readiness to engage in learning play with other children and parents, as well as the

development of the ability to discuss the experience gained in working with the children and other adults in the school.

The improvement of the home environment as a result of experience at the school.

This includes the space in which a child can play, experience and experiment; the time parents are prepared to give in talking, playing, reading and generally having fun with their children and the development of tolerance towards the child in expressing himself vocally, visually, emotionally, physically.

The development of a positive attitude towards participation in activities outside the school.

This involves a willingness to take part in activities both inside and outside the school, concerning the interests of all the inhabitants of the local area and elsewhere.

THE LEARNING SETTING

The above objectives can be achieved by an integrated system of activities, methods and organisational structure based on the following assumptions regarding the learning process for para-professionals:

- .. Para-professionals develop their skills and attitudes best through cooperation with professionals and each other.
- .. These skills and attitudes are transferable to situations outside the school.
- .. Para-professionals learn best by direct experience.
- .. They also learn by becoming increasingly aware of the limitations and potentialities of the physical environment in which they work.
- .. Cooperation stems from a basis of common interests.

Various aspects of the learning setting for para-professionals can be distinguished.

Learning to work with people and materials.

It is expected that in the process of learning about the job there will be a realisation of the objectives outlined above. Thus training is seen as *on-the-job*. Initially mothers are shown to a section of the classroom which offers specific opportunities for the children as they can move around freely, individually or in groups, accepting or rejecting as they please. But it soon becomes clear that the adults present must take some initiative if they are to be able to guide and help the children. Most newcomers find this difficult and sometimes the professional teacher has to prompt them into helping but after a few sessions parents are familiar with most of the activity corners and their self-confidence begins to develop. It is not long before they are making use of all the available materials, including everything from paints and clay to physical apparatus.

Observations of other parents and the professional teacher give an indication of what works well and soon parents are fascinated by their involvement with children engaged in playing/learning activities. Particular points of interest or queries can be taken up in the parents' meetings and periodically the professional teachers demonstrate the particular use of special materials. Social skills are also developed through on-the-job training. Para-professionals have to learn that explanations and discussions with others are vitally necessary if all are to cooperate in working together and conflicts to be solved.

Learning to participate in broader school-based activities.

Participation in the day-to-day decision-making involved in running the classroom and cooperation with others on how it will be organised is a necessary part of the learning process. So too is participation in the meetings between parents and teachers which determine the management of the school. At these meetings general educational questions are raised, as well as other educational matters of common interest to the local community, e.g. the provision for pre-school children in the area. In this way para-professionals are enabled to gain a wider perspective on the problems confronting them daily. From these meetings, working groups are formed to attend to particular tasks, such as the organisation of excursions for children, a school party for the parents or the production of a film or leaflet about the school. It has been found

that attendance at these evenings tends to decline from about 80% initially to 40%.

Learning to participate in activities concerning community interests.

The transfer of an attitude of positive participation to activities outside the school is yet another facet of the learning setting. The issues involved are mainly those of greatest concern to the local community, such as the opportunities available to children to grow and develop both in and out of school, the rents of the flats, the cost of equipping child-care centres, the possibilities for social contact etc. Action has been taken on various matters concerning rents, playing space in the area, the increasingly high cost of living, participation in local committees, political parties and trade unions. The para-professionals who have or are being trained at the school are to be found also on local district committees.

EXPERIENCES

At the beginning of the project, the large room was open-plan and both children and parents were free to join in any of the activities. The professional teachers, however, had a responsibility to ensure that the children and the para-professionals became involved in as wide a range of learning situations as possible. Difficulties arose, however, as there was a constant flow of children between different activity corners and an uneven distribution of adults. The parents were reluctant to take any initiatives and expected the professional teachers to assume responsibility for direction and control.

There were no consistent groups of children, therefore, and no adult constantly on hand at any one place. Experience showed that this system was not conducive to a constructive play/learning situation for either children or parents. The net result was that parents were uncertain about what they should do and were unable therefore, to execute tasks properly, or else they took refuge in pseudo-activities such as cleaning or administrative duties when they should have been fully occupied with the children. For many children this unstructured situation naturally presented a challenge to start investigating, exploring and experimenting without anyone to keep an eye on them. But for a number of others it led to

insecurity and fear which manifested itself both inside and outside the school. In addition, there were also children who escaped attention completely because of the lack of awareness of the para-professionals.

In a discussion on these problems both the para-professional parents and professional teachers came to the conclusion that the para-professionals were so unused to acting with self-assurance in school that it appeared rather unusual and strange to do so. Wariness as to the reactions of other members of the group exacerbated the situation. But it was a difficulty which had to be overcome and the para-professionals had to be supported in their efforts to act independently, not to succumb to the fear of social pressure and to participate fully in the activities of the school. It was found that this could be accomplished most easily in a limited space with a fairly constant group and the decision to operate in this way was made by a working committee of parents and teachers. Thus, the toddlers were divided into four groups of ten children each which were then put together in one section of the room for specific activities supervised by two of the para-professionals and one professional. After about forty-five minutes the groups changed round so that each one had the opportunity of working in all four areas in every session. The intention was that children would remain in the same group although they were free to join any of the others if they so wished and some indicated clearly that they did; they did not wish to remain with one group or in one section. The system worked well initially, but it eventually became clear that there was a division of opinion among the parents. One group preferred to work this way as they felt it was more directive; the other group, which tended to be less authoritarian with regard to procedures at school, rejected the idea of keeping the children together in the one section. In order to maintain a balance, free movement between sections was introduced again for a part of some sessions.

From this particular experience it became clear that there was a need for more specific instructions to the parents on the possibilities for using the various sections within the school. The solution adopted was that of giving each teacher specific responsibility for a group of ten to twelve children and assigning the para-professionals to particular groups. Thus the para-professionals were enabled to develop sufficient confidence to take decisions about their own small group of children. They came to see themselves as part of a team headed by the professional

teacher and were able to function more efficiently in that setting. For example, when the teachers have to attend a meeting, two experienced para-professionals can now act quite confidently in their place during that period and take the appropriate responsibility. All the para-professionals cooperate on this and are willing to recognise and accept their own responsibilities. Although the groups of children and their teachers are fairly stable, over a period of time there are shifts, for as the older children leave to join a kindergarten, their parents leave also to make way for a new arrival. The new child's parents will then participate in the training process under the supervision of the professional teachers who do remain in the school permanently.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

There are two possibilities open for the extension of the work of the pre-school and it is hoped to follow up both. The first is expansion upwards to subsequent stages of the education system so that parents from all socio-economic milieux can be encouraged to participate in the work of schools at all levels. The second is expansion sideways in cooperation with local community centres which are in their own way providing care and supervision for the children of working parents.
