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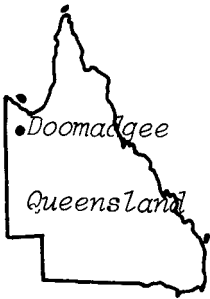
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER


 AN EVALUATION OF FAMILY EDUCATION
AT DOOMADGEE

R. Cunnington

ORIGINS OF FAMILY EDUCATION AT DOOMADGEE

Family education was first started here during 1970 when Lex Grey was invited to assist in the establishment of the program. The parents warmed to the idea of such a program and success was almost immediate.

The venue for the program has varied from an old building that was once used as a school to the pre-school building and in 1978, when a cottage at the school was available, the program was moved to this location.

From the inception the program has been run by parents and during 1978 and 1979 the input was enriched by Bronwyn Cruikshank, an ex-teacher, who was willing to spend her time and effort in assisting with the planning of the program. Unfortunately, during the last half of 1979, Bronwyn was no longer able to assist in this manner. Interest was maintained but without careful planning and direction along some structured basis the centre became more of a play parlour.

It was at this stage that the principal, Mr Lionel Fawssett, in collaboration with Bronwyn and Rose Cunnington, (infant teacher) decided to terminate the program until such times as a qualified teacher was available to provide structures that would ensure an environment in which progressive developmental growth of children could take place. Lionel applied to the Education Department and was able to have Rose released from her teaching duties in order to run the program during 1980.

During the first half of the year Rose worked with one teacher aide, Mrs Estelle George. Estelle's hours were not really sufficient

* Ms Rose Cunnington, Doomadgee, Qld.

to enable her to train to be able to take over more and more responsibility in running the program.

In June 1980 it was possible for three ladies to be enrolled in a course which was specifically designed to train them to eventually take over the running of the program. These three ladies were Estelle George, Veronica Jack and Dorothy Albert. The other two ladies were selected by Estelle as people she would be happy to work with and ladies who were considered to have natural teaching abilities which would be an asset to the program. These ladies have proved very keen and capable 'teachers' and now, in November 1980, just six months after beginning their training they are virtually running the program on their own. Interest is still very high among the Doomadgee mothers and children and everyone seems to enjoy their morning at Family Education.

ESTABLISHING THE PROGRAM

Initially only those mothers whose children would be attending pre-school in 1981 were asked if they were interested in becoming involved in the Family Education Program in 1980. Mothers of younger children indicated that they were keen to be attending as well and before long 62 children ranging between the ages of one and three were attending each week, each child coming only one morning a week.

Some of Estelle George's comments follow:

At first we visited the homes and asked the mums if they would like to have us coming to their homes or would rather come up to Merrara. The mums said they'd rather come along to Merrara.

We'd have ten mums a day with thirteen or fourteen kids. Each morning we go down and pick them up on the school truck. The program runs from 10 o'clock when we pick them up and finishes at 12 o'clock, so the mums would have time to get lunch ready for their older ones at school.

The little ones love coming up here to Merrara. The little girls come and go straight into the dolls room and dress themselves up and the boys go and play in the sand with the trucks. When it's time for singing and a story, they join in with the singing and sit and listen to the story.

Early in the year we'd go down to the river banks. The children enjoyed themselves making sand-castles, swinging, playing, throwing lids and balls. We'd have a week down the river and then come back to Merrara the next week.

ORIGINAL ASPIRATIONS OF THE PROGRAM

1. The children become familiar with
 - a) their teacher (Rose) as an acceptable person,
 - b) her language (standard English) and can understand what she says and enjoy her company and stories.
 - c) Listening to an adult - in both dialects, i.e. Aboriginal English and standard English.
 - d) Songs and stories in standard English.
2. Parents will be encouraged to
 - a) become more aware of their children's needs (educationally);
 - b) communicate more with their children - more talking, telling and showing;
 - c) have more confidence in their own abilities to be a 'teacher';
 - d) become more aware of what they can do in the way of educating their own children.

By providing a situation where each 'world' can flow into the other -

enjoyment/sharing in the centre (school language)
enjoyment/sharing in the village (village dialect)

PRESENT ASPIRATIONS FOR THE PROGRAM

The original aspirations have altered somewhat mainly due to the fact that Estelle, Veronica and Dorothy are now running the program with Rose acting merely as a consultant.

No longer will there be the input of standard English from a European person but the natural language will flow more freely and the children should receive greater benefit because it will be a familiar and comfortable language environment. Songs and stories will continue to be in standard English so there will still be this input.

Hence the aspirations will be as follows:

1. The children will become familiar with
 - a) Merrara as a fun learning environment;
 - b) listening to an adult;
 - c) songs and stories in standard English.
2. Parents will be encouraged to
 - a) have confidence in their own abilities to be a 'teacher';
 - b) become more aware of their children's development;
 - c) play with their children and see how they are learning through play;
 - d) communicate more with their children - more talking, telling and ing;
 - e) expand ideas for use at Merrara and at home.

MERRARA - WHAT IS IT?

Merrara is an Aboriginal word from the Gungalida language which means 'lovely'. It is the name given to a cottage which was erected in late 1977 by the Schools Commission. The building is in the school yard and hence the Family Education which is held in this cottage is seen by the community as being a part of the child's schooling years.

MERRARA - HOW IS IT USED?

The following is a list of the facilities at Merrara and how they are used in the Family Education Program.

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|-------------|---|
| Bathroom | - waterplay (until we purchased a plastic swimming pool); washing hands and feet (after finger and foot painting); bathing dolls. |
| Bedroom | - Dressing up; baby game; hospital game; gammon cooking (gammon = local word for pretending). |
| Lounge room | - Other indoor play activities. |
| Kitchen | - Making and having morning tea (the children usually cook something for morning tea each day.) |
| Outside | - All outside activities (a bowershade has been built at the back of the cottage over a sandpit and this provides shade for many activities during the hot months). |

MERRARA PROGRAM

The program at the Merrara cottage is divided into two main sections, that of outdoor and indoor play. Usually when the children arrive, after being collected in the school vehicle, they go straight into the kitchen and cook something for their morning tea. The recipes used have varied from popcorn, to pikelets, to putting faces on arrowroot biscuits. This has become a favourite time and provides excellent opportunity for language to be exchanged between the mother and child in a very meaningful way.

Outdoor play is usually centred around and under the bower-shade which was built by some of the fathers. This provides much needed shade during the hot months. The swimming pool, a small plastic one, is not only used for water play as originally intended, because the children insist on removing their clothes and cooling off in the often vividly coloured water. Washing the dolls clothes has also proved a popular activity and not only for the girls - the boys like to get in on the action too. Opening the pegs to hang out these clothes has proved to be a little difficult for some of the little ones, but they have successfully solved the problem by opening them with their mouths. They are often seen in rather awkward positions trying to get the pegs from their mouths on to the string line.

After morning tea and perhaps a short session of TV, the indoor play session takes place. The bedroom has become the dress-up room and the girls are drawn here to play their baby game. Some old crockery, saucepans and other kitchen equipment have been sent up and these items have become the basis of a Wendy House that is very much Doomadgee orientated. The cakes and biscuits made with the dough are usually taken and placed in the 'gammon' oven to cook - they are often forgotten and are found the next day in the cardboard box, very dry and hard, or perhaps burnt would be a better description.

Each week the mothers make some small play item to take home for their little one. These items are all made from scraps that the mothers have around the home or are easily available, and the feedback from some mothers has been encouraging, in that they have been doing similar activities at home and often improving the end product.

Every effort has been made to use scrap material for most of the activities at Merrara, e.g. dolls beds are made from cardboard boxes, horses are broom handles, pieces of hose have been used to blow bubbles etc. In doing so, it is hoped that the mothers will see ideas of things they are able to do at home without a great outlay of money, or importing other unavailable items from outside Doomadgee.

EVALUATION BY MOTHERS

At the end of each morning a few minutes were set aside for the mothers to fill in an evaluation sheet indicating the things their little ones could do. We were very dubious about doing this at first but the results were so pleasing that this was continued until third term.

At the beginning of the third term we realised that although it was good for the mothers to be filling in these forms at the end of a session, they were not aware of the reasons for including certain activities in the program and were not able to be looking for particular skills or be talking about colour, size etc. while their children were actually involved in the activity. Hence we altered the format to more of an information sheet, which is given to the mothers on arrival at Merrara, telling them the activities for that day and detailing some of the learning that can be gleaned from each activity.

RECORDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILDREN

One entire wall in the Merrara cottage is taken up with an evaluation chart. It contains the names of all the three and four year old children and some of the younger children. Against these names is a list of different developmental areas of pre-school learning, e.g. gross motor, fine motor and social development etc. As soon as one of the ladies working at Merrara notices a child displaying ability in one of the skills listed, a tick is made in the specific column. Mothers are also encouraged to tell Estelle, Veronica or Dorothy if their child can do something on the checklist and an appropriate tick will be made.

The chart has another use as well as evaluating progress of the children's development - it is also used as the springboard for planning each week's program. Each Friday morning is set aside for planning, and this time begins at this chart, searching for areas in which the children show little development, and structuring activities that will help in these areas.

HOME VISITING PROGRAM

In addition to the Merrara Program, a home-visiting program has been operating. This has involved visits to the homes of the children who will be attending pre-school during 1981. These visits were intended to be a fun time, with the subtle aim of showing the mums ways in which the children could learn at home.

Initially these visits were made to only four homes by Rose, but as acceptance grew, more homes were opened to this new and different type of program. Almost immediately after Estelle, Veronica and Dorothy began their training, they were involved in this aspect of the program as well.

For several weeks these ladies visited the homes with Rose and soon were taking most of the interactive role with the mums and the children. Each Friday during the planning session there was discussion about the type of activities for these home visits. When the three ladies felt they could competently make these visits on their own, they quite openly stated this and then took over this area of the program.

These visits took place after dinner each day, with each of the Family Education 'teachers' visiting one home each afternoon, spending about half an hour, sometimes longer, playing with the child and showing the mother how to make a toy or game. Each morning before the children and mothers arrived for the Merrara program, a short time was allowed for discussion about the previous day's visits. Discussion mainly centred around how the visits went and how they could be improved.

As Estelle has commented -

We'd go to one home one day and another home another day. We'd start Monday and go right until Friday. At a home there'd be one or two children. At first I'd get out whatever I had brought with me - some puzzles or a piece of paper and pencils. I'd have one and the child would have one. Whatever I'd do the child would copy it. I think it has been really good. I would also have something for the mum to do. She'd make something and put it on the wall at home.

INTRODUCTION TO PRE-SCHOOL

During the third term of 1980, after discussion between the family education staff and the pre-school teacher, it was decided to dedicate two afternoons a week for eight weeks in an attempt to introduce the four-year-old children to pre-school.

Beginning on 24th September, each Wednesday and Thursday afternoon, the pre-school was made available for this introduction program. Annette Harden, the pre-school teacher, was present at all sessions but initially took very little active part. Gradually, as the children

felt more confident with her, Annette took a more active role, until during the last two weeks she ran these sessions but still with the supportive presence of mothers and the family education staff.

This familiarization with the pre-school has, I feel, benefited both the children and the mothers in that they understand the pre-school routine and feel comfortable in the pre-school atmosphere. These eight weeks have allowed for a natural progression from family education to pre-school, and hopefully have alleviated some of the traumas associated with beginning pre-school in a foreign setting and with a stranger.

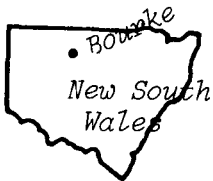
BENEFITS RESULTING FROM FAMILY EDUCATION

The benefits resulting from this year's Family Education Program are as follows:

1. The children are ready for pre-school. After observing the children at the pre-school introduction sessions the pre-school teacher has commented that these children have related to her in a far more positive way than children have in previous years and that they were contributing to the singing and story times in a very mature way.
2. The children appear to be talking more. This observation was made by Estelle, who has a real gift in helping children express themselves. She has been able to show the mothers how to play with their children in make-believe games and this has been a great encouragement to the children to express themselves to their mothers and to the mothers to talk more to their children.
3. The children have been excited and helped. It has become obvious, by looking at the record of the children's development, just how much they have been helped through the program. Admittedly, almost all of the skills on the chart are developmental and the children would achieve them eventually, but it appears that their development has been accelerated through the interest of the mothers and other adults and the atmosphere of Merrara.
4. The children want to come to 'school'. This is a very important benefit when absenteeism is a very real problem for schools on most Aboriginal communities. Merrara is seen as a part of the school and this has psychological advantage when the children literally cry to come along when they see the school truck picking up children.

5. Parents understand school more. Because the mothers have been 'in' on the reasons for doing certain things at Family Education, they seem to have more of an understanding that there are reasons for the things that are done at 'the big school'. I have noticed that children who have had an absentee problem have improved in their attendance at school since their mothers have been coming to Family Education with a smaller sibling.

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BLACK SCHOOLS : A STEP FORWARD OR BACK?

*D.Huggonson

Some radical Aborigines are currently advocating the establishment of Black Independent Schools because they are dissatisfied with the education and treatment which Aboriginal children are receiving in New South Wales Government Schools. It must be pointed out that every survey of Aboriginal education since the Department of Education became completely responsible for the education of all Aboriginal children in 1940 , has reiterated the fact that the system is failing to adequately educate Aboriginal children. However, many older Aborigines and some conservative Aboriginal parents fear a return to substandard Mission Schools if separate Black Schools are widely established. They also fear that Black Schools would give white parents and school administrators a means of excluding Aboriginal children from regular Government Schools.

Most improvements in the system of education for Aborigines have been initiated and financed by the Commonwealth Government over the past ten years. The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme designed to assist families in keeping their children at high school and the 60 Aboriginal teachers' aides in New South Wales are both Commonwealth-funded programs.

The NSW Department of Education seems content to co-operate with Commonwealth departments but to take no initiative themselves. What then can, and should the NSW Department do to improve the quality of education that Aboriginal children receive?

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