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PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION: AN ABORIGINAL TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE#

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I'd like to share with you today some of the experiences I've had over the years I've been involved in pre-school education. But before I get down to some of my personal experiences, I'd like to talk about pre-school education in general.

I suppose everyone knows that 0-5 are the most important years of a child's development. Kindergarten provides an opportunity for children to learn, amongst other things, social skills, to explore their abilities and build their confidence and self-esteem.

The kindergarten experience helps the child to realise that he can do things on his own. He is learning and achieving things through his play. It is important for parents to realise that kindergarten is not just a child-minding centre but somewhere where real education is taking place.

Kindergarten teachers are trying to provide *the best possible learning environment*.

PARENT AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

One of the things which could provide extra motivation for the child at kindergarten is when he sees his parents and other members of the family at the centre. This is one of the reasons why kindergarten teachers are always striving for parent and family involvement. We want parents to feel that they are a part of the centre and are welcome any time.

How can we get parents and family involved? Doing the ironing, sharing a cooking experience or bathing the baby could help a mum to feel she has something to share and to feel important and wanted. Also, the children are learning to interact with other people.

It is important for teachers and parents to remember that parents are teachers too. One really successful involvement activity at Gundala has been making tapes of songs and poems for the children to share at home. Another sharing activity is scrap books. By this activity we are extending the kindergarten into the home.

Teachers and parents need to have a friendly, trusting relationship, but to be prepared to work at it. It will be easier with some people than with others. One of the ways in which you can build up this relationship is by doing home visits. This will be of benefit to everyone, e.g. child, parents, teachers and others in the family. The child sees that the teacher is interested in his home environment. It is important that parents don't feel teachers only call around when there is something wrong, so informal visits are just as important.

Teachers need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the needs of the parents, e.g. a lonely parent. Sometimes the teacher needs to act as a resource person for these parents needing assistance. It is good then for teachers to have contacts with, for example, Legal Aid, Emergency Care, Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency, etc.

Teachers need to understand there are different ways to approach different parents. They have to

consider and respect their social and cultural backgrounds. Some parents appreciate the opportunity to share their culture with others from different backgrounds.

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MY EXPERIENCE AS AN ABORIGINAL TEACHER

Looking now at the past and the present, I can see advantages and disadvantages of being an Aboriginal teacher. One advantage has been knowing some of my parents and their families share a common language and similar background experiences. Another advantage is pride in being an Aboriginal person.

Some of the disadvantages have been -

- a) High and unrealistic expectations from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. I do not regard myself as a Black Superwoman! I don't have all the answers. I'm still learning myself.
- b) Social and cultural pressures, especially during my period at college. I could have given up many times, but for family and friends. Other students did give up. The Aboriginal students needed to support each other.

After completing Kinderkraft at the City Hall in 1968, I discovered a lot of jealousy and resentment instead of acceptance. This is when I went back to Cherbourg. I was called a 'white black fellow', or, 'she thinks she is white'. This was, and still is, very hurtful.

It is important then for Aboriginal and Islander people to become trained in the field of education and to keep it up no matter what anyone says. Maybe then these barriers will gradually be broken down.

* Paper presented at the Aboriginal Pre-school Seminar held at Wandarrah Pre-school, Inala, Brisbane, 8th May, 1981.

