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PARENT PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION: WAYS OF FOSTERING SCHOOL-HOME COOPERATION

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INTRODUCTION

Those involved in educational programs with Aboriginal children have noted that the parents have little contact with the schools, and feel that they are unable to help their children with their schoolwork, even where they express interest in their children's school progress.

In her comprehensive study of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, Watts (1976) reported that fewer than 40% of parents said that they helped their children with their schoolwork, and the main reason they gave for not helping was that they did not feel able to. Furthermore, the majority of Aboriginal parents had little contact with the school: 70% stated that they had not met their children's teachers. These figures refer to parents of high school children, but it seems unlikely that the pattern would be greatly different if home-school contacts at the primary level were investigated. Watts (1976:48) commented that schools have done little to involve parents in a meaningful way in the education of their children, and so parents remain unaware of the practical ways in which they could help their children and support them in their schooling. A great gulf is fixed between the home and the school, to the disadvantage of many children in Australian society.

This article is concerned with ways of bridging the gap between home and school. It describes procedures by which schools can go beyond the initial bridge-building of communication with families, to the development of structures of cooperation, where Aboriginal parents become partners with the schools in the education of their children. It refers to experiences from projects in Brisbane, which concerned extensive home-contact with Aboriginal families, to suggest that the insights from these projects should be applied to forge new relationships between the school and the home. One of the two projects (Watts and Henry, 1978) concerned younger children and was of two years duration; the other project (Cotterell, 1974) concerned school-age children and continued for nine months. The focus of the present article is upon the practical aspects of implementing a program of home contact. It draws heavily upon the Brisbane projects, particularly that with school-age children by Cotterell, to outline certain procedures which could be implemented by schools.

THE EVIDENCE FROM ACTION-RESEARCH

The program described in this section involved seven Aboriginal families in urban Brisbane, and eighteen children aged six to ten years. Each week, the homes were visited for a period of about one hour, and children's storybooks provided for the families to use. The purpose of the visits was to promote the informal teaching which occurs in the home, and harness the motivating influences of the home to the benefit of the children's language and reading development.

The focus of the program was the relationships between the mother and her child or children. The home visits used children's books to bring mother and child together on common ground and to stimulate conversation and reading. The books were seen as creating a little world of experiences which child and mother share, a world of ideas and feelings as well as factual knowledge which offers many teaching and learning opportunities. The home visits were designed to assist mothers to interact more effectively with their children through the book reading program. By using 'trade-book', children's books of good quality, the project opened an avenue for mothers to interact with their children in a natural way, stimulated by materials which were interesting to the mother as well as to the child. The major purpose, then, of the introduction of children's books into the home was motivational.

The style of the home-visits was informal and non-directive, with an emphasis by the visitor on cooperating with the parents in their role as educators. It was felt that such an approach was more consonant with the values of the families than an approach which imposed a set of procedures on them from 'outside', because it recognised that any ideas have to be accepted by families on their own terms. Instead of beginning with a series of training sessions, the program adopted a gradual (though not entirely non-directive) approach to guiding and advising parents.

The guidance procedures which were employed in the program to help parents define their role and to accept their responsibility as participants were integrated with general discussions which occurred on the weekly visits. A card was given to the mother early in the program which listed the simple ideas which the home visitor emphasized in the visits. These ideas referred to spending some time each day with the children in reading, and to ways of interacting. On subsequent visits, reference was made to these points, and to the mother's card which listed them. A second procedure was a note-taking one, where parents were regularly asked simple questions about the books which the children had been given the week before. The questions mainly referred to the child's interest in the book, the parts that were enjoyed the most, and how much the child could remember of the story; but a question was included to find out which days the mother did some reading with the children. In addition to these aspects of 'contingency management', the home-visitor himself interacted with the children, and continued to demonstrate to the mother how to develop her teaching skills.

As the home visits became a regular part of the family's weekly activity, the influence of the program, and the visitor's modelling of techniques, became evident. Mothers showed greater involvement with their children's reading. They made comments on their own accord about their children's progress and about their own participation. They made more demands on their children to tell them about stories and ideas in the books, and exercised more control over the ways the children looked at books and used books. There was evidence of the influence of the program in relation to changes in the climate of the home. The home visitor's encouragement of parents to take pride in the achievement of their children was noticeable in the behaviour of mothers towards their boys. His constant praise of six boys from five different families (boys who were considerably retarded in reading in most instances) led to mothers in each of these families praising the boys to the home visitor for their achievement, or to their giving approving remarks to the boys themselves.

Diary records of parent involvement indicated that there were considerable fluctuations in the involvement level of mothers from time to time. All families admitted on occasions to having not read to their children in the preceding week. The main reason given was interruption of the family routine. Visitors might arrive and stay for several days; domestic upsets and family tensions might occur; the children might fall sick. When such

emergencies arose, or the mother was just too busy, they took priority over any reading program.

The project sought to foster the development of language and reading skills in urban Aboriginal children by harnessing the motivational influences of the home. The major function of the mother was to motivate her child by encouraging and helping him or her, but the mother was clearly involved in several teaching functions - questioning, instructing, explaining, praising the child for something to do with reading. What was important to the project was to assist mothers to see the value of engaging in these teaching functions and to see themselves as competent enough to perform these functions. Evidence from diary records and from a follow-up parent questionnaire indicates that most of the parents did not consider that they were equipped to act as teachers of their children. Though they were not required to be teachers in any formal sense of the word, but to encourage and be involved with their children, these distinctions were often not clear to them. It seemed that the relationship between the home-visitor and the parents was a necessary support to the parents in performing their teaching functions.

While the value of the home-visiting aspect of the program could be seen in the ways families responded, it would seem that the involvement of Aboriginal parents in motivating and helping their children requires not simply the initiation of home-school contact, but creation of an on-going system of home-visiting. Where such a system was developed and maintained, a good deal of benefit to the educational progress of Aboriginal children could result.

The Watts and Henry research project was more extensive in its scope than the project described above but based on very similar principles of operation. One of its chief objectives was to train three Aboriginal mothers as parent educators, who demonstrated to the mother a variety of activities in which she could interact with her child, and acted as models for the mother in helping her to learn them. The three parent educators so trained became exponents of the principles which were first demonstrated to them. The effectiveness of their behaviour in the role of parent educators provides some proof of the generalizability of the principles which have been discussed here. Watts and Henry summed up the effects of the year's experience of the three parent educators in the following way:

> They became more understanding and patient with their own children. They found new ways of helping their own children. They felt more confident about meeting people. They learned to accept the difficulties and problems of other people. They made a lot of new friends. They most of all enjoyed being their own bosses, that is, being independent... None of them, at the end of the project, felt they needed further or different training for the job (Watts and Henry, 1978, p. 121).

Of course, this development was achieved over some time, and requires those devising programs of this nature to make clear the role of the parent educator, and to train the parent educator accordingly (See Appendix A). From the report by Watts and Henry, it is clear that this training is on-going, as the competencies of parent educators at their tasks become more developed.

A SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM OF HOME VISITING

The programs of parent education described above were not integrated with school programs, although their focus on language development, and on the development of a greater sense of competence in mothers and children were clearly related to school objectives. If such programs of home visiting were linked with schools, their effectiveness in parent education would be increased.

Within a school, the functions of home visitor can be related to the functions of instructional aide in the classroom: the parent educator acts as home visitor to the mothers of the children with whom she is working in the classroom. In this way, the range of opportunities for the school to influence and help the child is greatly increased. The teacher and parent educator become more familiar with the particular needs and circumstances of each child, and more able to individualize their teaching; and the school has a channel through which its objectives can be understood by parents, and the motivating influences of the home enlisted in supporting what a child learns in school.

The teacher aide fulfils the kind of role in the classroom in schools at the present time which could be extended to become a home visitor and parent educator. The present work of the teacher aide is as an instructional aide in the classroom, augmenting the teaching work of the class teacher through giving help to individual children or small groups on various learning tasks. Thus the teacher aide functions as a paraprofessional member of the teaching team, and performs a wide range of tasks which go beyond clerical or nursing support. In being involved in the classroom, the teacher aide comes to know the children, their capabilities on various tasks, the nature of the classroom activities in which they must develop competence, and is thus well placed to advise and help parents in understanding the nature of their child's school progress.

The concept of the teacher aide acting as parent educator, as part of her work in the school, is a clearly educative one, which reaches beyond that of acting as a liaison between the school and the home. Her regular visits to the homes do improve communication, of course, as they enable parents to be better informed about the school's activities. Her activity with parents is more specifically aimed at involving them as active participants in their children's education. As parent educator, the teacher aide may bring books to the homes, and demonstrate ways in which parents can use the books in interacting with their children. Suggestions for this approach are set out in Appendix B and Appendix C. As parent educator she may teach more specific tasks for parents to practice with their children. These would be home learning tasks which are similar to those used with small groups of children in the classroom, devised by the teacher to develop particular skills and concepts. Suggestions for such tasks are given in Watts and Henry (1978). The purpose of the home tasks, whether specific or more general, is to enable parents to adopt patterns of interaction common to the school setting and to develop the relationship between parent and child. The parent educator acts as a model, demonstrating and explaining the activities in the home, and promoting and encouraging parents to practice the activities.

A distinction should be made between extending the program of the school into the home, and involving the home as participants in a child's education. The program suggested in this article is seen as a cooperative endeavour between the school and the home. It argues that the parent educator can assist parents to become more effective in interacting with their children, but the program is a two-way street. The school, through the work of the parent educator as paraprofessional within the classroom, can develop activities for children which adopt suggestions from parents and utilize the interests of parents and of their children which the home visits uncover.

In summary, this article proposes that schools consider ways of developing programs of a cooperative nature, involving the homes of Aboriginal children. It suggests that there are three main elements in the implementation of such programs. These are:

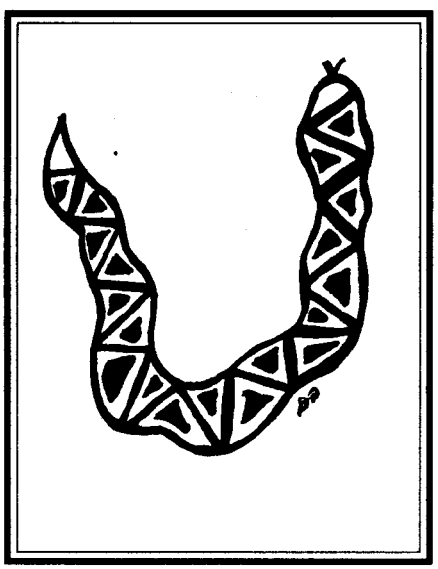
a) Utilization of paraprofessional school staff as parent educators.

b) Utilization of parents as motivators of their children's learning.

c) Utilization of appropriate materials as a stimulus to parent-child interaction.

Such programs would capitalize on parental support and encouragement of their children, the likelihood of greater value consonance between that of the child and his learning environment, and the structured system of learning provided by the school.

There is general agreement that it is desirable to develop greater continuity of learning between the home and the school; it is evident from this article that ways of creating closer contact between the home and the school are not easily achieved. Home-school programs need to proceed with care, caution and commitment, but awareness of the difficulties should not prevent us from pressing ahead with actions designed to improve existing relationships.



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(See following appendices)

APPENDIX A: ROLE OF PARENT EDUCATOR

	Task Description	Time Allocated	Necessary Skills	Support
1.	Visit homes once a week	1 hour per home per week (incl. travel time). Total. 10 hours per week	Ability to demonstrate teaching skills and ability to relate with parents effectively (in their own speech patterns)	Visiting consultant, school principal
2.	Plan with teacher home visits, activities for home and school	3 hours per week	Ability to work with and listen to teaching staff	School library teacher, class teachers
3.	Discuss performance of individual children with teachers	1 hour per week (but various)	Ability to observe children and describe concisely	Visiting consultant, teaching staff
4.	Convey general information from school to parents, and report parent ideas and concerns to school	Part of (1) and (3)	Ability and willingness to listen to parents, and to be clearly informed about school plans	School principal
5.	Work in classroom with individual children and groups of children as arranged with class teacher	10 hours per week	Ability to work easily with children and to enjoy interacting with them	teaching staff

APPENDIX B: *PARENT TEACHING GUIDES*

BEHAVIOUR FOCUS CARD (use a card with the following suggestions: discuss the points each visit with the parents)

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILD IN READING

1. Keep aside *a few minutes each day* for reading aloud to him.
2. *Pick a time* to read when the child will want to listen.
3. Get your child to *tell you* about the pictures and the story.
4. *Praise your child* for saying a word or sentence from the book.
5. Get your child to *read to you* sometimes.
6. Always aim to make the reading and story time *enjoyable and fun*.

PROCEDURES OF BOOK USE

- open a book in the mother's presence
- show how she can arouse interest in her child
- show how she can use the pictures to talk about the story:

  e.g. "What are they doing in the picture?"
  "What do you think they are saying?"
  "What do you think might happen next?"

- use the picture to arouse feelings:

  e.g. "What colour do you like most?"
  "Do you think he *felt* sad?"
  "Would you like to be out in the cold snow?"

- refer to words on the page:

  e.g. "Well, what does the book say?"
  "Can you pick out the word truck?"
  "Where is 'girl' in this line?"

- use fingers to help in reading a word bit by bit
- use pictures to have a talk about all the things the *child can name*
- read a part of the story and *then* show the child the picture
- demonstrate how the mother can listen to a child read to her while she is ironing etc.

APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION RATING SCALES

BEHAVIOUR DESCRIPTION CHART (MOTHER)

	Never or hardly ever	Now and then, sometimes	Often most of time
A. MOTIVATIONAL ASPECT			
1. Is relaxed and interested in reading task.			
2. Helps child to notice things in the books.			
3. Prompts child to think about the story and what is happening.			
4. Discourages child from flicking pages over without any reading.			
5. Encourages child to remember a story.			
6. Expresses enjoyment about a picture or a story.			
B. COMMUNICATIVE ASPECT			
1. Asks questions of child.			
2. Prompts child to use sentences in answers.			
3. Gives child time to think about answer before giving more help.			
4. Discourages guessing by child.			
5. Praises child for answers.			

APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION RATING SCALES

BEHAVIOUR DESCRIPTION CHART (CHILD)

	Never or hardly ever	Now and then, sometimes	Often, most of time
A. MOTIVATIONAL ASPECT			
1. Handles books with care.			
2. Turns pages of books slowly, allowing time for reading the words silently and studying the pictures thoughtfully.			
3. Expresses enjoyment about a particular story or picture.			
B. READING AND COMMUNICATION ASPECT			
1. Spontaneously picks out words from page of book.			
2. Confidently describes pictures in book.			
3. Suggests what is happening in the story.			
4. Remembers accurately a story read in previous week.			