

CHAPTER 1V

. PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

Introduction

The term "pre-primary education" as used here is to be understood as relating to the establishments which children between the ages of two and six attend. There are no pre-primary schools in Fiji. A scheme for the educational reconstruction which this study envisages must take into account the establishment of pre-primary education. The plan for the development of pre-primary education in Fiji is discussed under the following headings: need for pre-primary education; organising, financing and supervision; educational activity and method; language and instruction; some special considerations; buildings and equipment; pre-primary teachers; parent-teacher relationship.

Need for Pre-Primary Education

The education of a child under six years of age is the first stage in the long and continuous process of the education of the individual and is therefore the most important step. First impressions last longest and have therefore great potentiality for good or bad. Educationists and psychologists all over the world are unanimous about treating the first formative years of the child's life with the greatest care and attention.¹

As long as the home can give the child all he needs, there is no better place for him. Unfortunately not every home in Fiji can

¹ Chris A. De Young. American Education. New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., 1960. Pp. 82-83.

give a child all he needs between the ages of two and six. His mother may be away or occupied most of the day, and there may be no one else able fully to take her place; there may be, as in the case of rural home, no other children whom he can meet; there may be no space, indoors or outdoors, in which he can safely play; the home may be too overcrowded for him to have and use the toys and materials he needs. There are some children who, earlier than most, reach the stage of wanting the company of more children than they can meet at home, and the stimulus of adults other than those they know. They outgrow their home's resources and for them the pre-primary education, at the right time, can supplement what the home provides.¹

The pre-primary education has always accepted children from the age of two, but recent observations have drawn attention to the fact that there is no lessening of the dependence of a child on his mother round about this age, and that the tie between them is still very close. For, paradoxically, a child striving his utmost to establish his independence needs his mother's assurance and support to achieve that independence. The earliest age of admission to pre-primary school is, therefore, tending to rise towards three years of age. In any case it is increasingly clear that children vary so greatly in their rate of development that the decision about the proper age for any child to enter a pre-primary school should always depend on his particular needs.²

A child's first attendance at the school should be made as gradual as possible. He may not, to begin with, spend the whole

¹ D.E.M. Gardner. Education Under Eight. London, Longmans, Green and Co.Ltd., 1949. P. 14.

² Organization of Pre-Primary Education. Paris, UNESCO; Geneva, International Bureau of Education, 1961. P. 26.

day there; in any case he should have visited it beforehand with his mother and stayed to watch the other children and to make the acquaintance of the teacher.

Nevertheless, the change from home to school is always a time of strain for a child and his mother; it is essential, therefore, that from the beginning the contacts between home and school should be close, genuine and visible. The mothers should always be welcome in the school, and a child should see his mother and teacher in friendly relationship.

Organising, Financing and Supervision.

The initiative to organise pre-primary education in Fiji must come from the people themselves. There is need for a pre-primary education institution in every village and the village school committee could take up this task. In towns these could be organised by churches, by religious bodies or movements, by women's associations, by municipal authorities, etc. But certainly no establishments should be permitted to be opened by private persons because there is the danger that these may be used for profit-making purposes.

Pre-primary education should be free and entirely optional as in New Zealand.¹ Finance to run these establishments should be raised through voluntary contributions by parents and various fund raising activities in the community.

This does not, however, free the Education Department from the responsibility of taking active part in the development and promotion of pre-primary education in the Colony. The Education Department should encourage such establishments by giving building grants as is done at the present time for establishing primary

¹ Ibid. Pp. 196-197.

schools and in addition the Education Department should shoulder 25 percent of the salary bill of trained pre-primary teachers. In Australia privately managed pre-primary schools receive subsidies from the state government,¹ and in New Zealand, in the case of pre-primary education, the Education Department finances the total cost of the salaries of teachers, principals and students- in- training, and makes subsidies of £1 for £1 raised locally for the cost of sites, buildings and equipment.²

Moreover, the Department of Education should be responsible for training pre-primary teachers and deciding the number of teachers for each school. The Department of Education should also be responsible for the supervision and inspection of pre-primary education throughout the Colony. The Supervisor of Infant Method, an officer of the Department, who at present supervises Classes 1 and 2 in primary schools, should be entrusted with the responsibility of supervising and inspecting pre-primary education. There should be one pre-primary education specialist stationed in every education district and she should maintain close contacts with each of the pre-primary schools in the district.

Educational Activity and Method

The activities provided in the pre-primary schools should be aimed at the total development of the whole child. All those who have the well-being of the young children at heart are agreed on one important thing, that it is as bad to care only for the body and neglect the mind as it is to care only for the mind and

¹ Financing of Education. Publication No. 163. Paris, Unesco; Geneva, International Bureau of Education (IBE), 1955. P. 84.

² Ibid. P. 206.

neglect the body. The child who is scrupulously clean but desperately unhappy is not being helped to grow into a useful member of the community; the child who is bright and intelligent and is physically unhealthy or has bad habits may become an unsatisfactory citizen later on.

An ideal day in a pre-primary school reflects as nearly as possible the kind of day which makes a contented child at home. The happiest child is one who lives in a home in which he feels safe because he is welcome there. An orderly home in which duties and pleasures follow some understood routine helps to give a child this sense of safety. He knows he will have meals, be kept clean, play his own games without interference, go to bed; and he also knows that some grown-up person is ordering it all. This sense of security helps to make him confident, encourages him to move and speak without fear and gradually to become independent and helpful to others.

The aim of the staff of the pre-primary school should be to provide this sense of security for children. This can be achieved in the following ways. First they should be sympathetic, cheerful and reliable, for by the attitude of the staff the children will soon know whether they are really welcome or not. Secondly, they must try to keep an orderly arrangement in the school, so that the children know where everything is and where it should be put away, for muddle and confusion will be a sure source of temper and tears, and prove very harassing to the staff. No attempt is made here to lay down what the exact order of the children's day should be, for the staff, of course, should make their own plans, but the programme should always include play both in and out of doors, having meals, washing and going to the lavatory, relaxation and sleep. In the pre-primary school education should be given in

accordance with a playing and working scheme, comprising the following activities: games and physical exercises, work with educational materials, modelling, drawing, story-telling and the teaching of children's songs. Emphasis should be given to habit forming, observation of nature and the environment as well as to music and aesthetic education. The Secondary Education Commission of India comments on the activities of pre-primary education thus:

At this stage, the child is introduced to the joy of learning through companionship and recreational activities, and it is slowly guided in proper habits of life, cleanliness and healthy modes of living as well as in the cultivation of social habits so necessary later for community life.¹

Language and Instruction

The language of instruction should be the mother tongue, Hindi, Fijian or English as the case may be. Children should be given plenty of opportunity to talk freely. While the children play, the teachers and their assistants should not be mere spectators. The teachers should frequently take part and open up new ideas and possibilities. She should ask questions, listen to children who want to talk and encourage conversation when the opportunity arises. Now and then she should read or tell a story or sing a song.

Between about four years of age and five, children's intellectual interests develop rapidly. They ask questions increasingly and need satisfying answers. Many are capable of careful and shrewd observations and of intelligent discussion with an adult of their own interests and experiences. The teacher should be ready and

¹ Ministry of Education, Government of India. Report of the Secondary Education Commission. (Dr. Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar was its chairman. This report is commonly referred to as Mudaliar Commission Report). Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1953. P. 17.

able to talk, see that books with good illustrations are available, and follow through enquiries they have set themselves.

Oral English may be introduced when the Indian and Fijian children are about five years of age. As English is the Official Language of the Colony of Fiji, the sooner it is introduced the better. Moreover, experience gained in other countries prove that pre-primary education helps in the change-over from vernacular to the national language.¹ No attempt, however, should be made to introduce formal instruction to the alphabets and numbers. All number work must be related to their daily experiences and the children should feel a need for them, that is, their learning must grow out of their daily activity and experience.

Some Special Considerations

The pre-primary school must take the full responsibility for the children's health and well-being which would be the natural care of the mother in a good home. The contact with more children than is usual in a family makes the avoidance of infection very important.

First of all the personal health of each child must be safeguarded and he must be helped to grow up strong enough to resist diseases. This can be done by various means, for instance, by giving the child sensible well-chosen and properly cooked food, seeing that he has enough sleep and rest as well as interesting activity in and out of doors, training him in good bodily habits

¹ "The following countries mention that pre-primary education assists in the change-over from the vernacular or dialect to the national language: Austria, Belgium, China (Republic of), Guatemala, Korea, Paraguay, Peru, Thailand, United Arab Republic." Organization of Pre-Primary Education. Op.cit. P. 35.

by regular and kindly routine and by keeping him suitably clothed and clean. It has been shown also that in all this important work there are opportunities for educating the children, so that bodily and mental growth are being considered at the same time.

Besides safeguarding the health of each individual child, the pre-primary school must also consider the health of the group. Here, of course, the main problem is to prevent one child infecting another. This work should form part of the regular routine of the school and it is carried out in the following ways: by keeping the school well ventilated so that there is always plenty of fresh air, by seeing that children are out of doors as much as possible and are suitably clothed to meet the various kinds of weather, by helping children to wash and use their own individual towels, face cloths, combs and toothbrushes. In addition there must be a very high standard of cleanliness in the school premises: all cups, spoons, cloths, etc., must receive constant care, and the most efficient methods must be used to clean and wash utensils, towels and all the things that children handle.¹

Buildings and Equipment

On account of the functional nature of the pre-primary education it is desirable that there be a certain flexibility in the design or at least in the arrangement of the premises intended for this kind of education. What is provided for the children should be used wherever it is convenient, both in and out of doors, and children should be able to move freely from one place to another. The furniture must be appropriate to the children's height and be easy to move and clean. Considerable place should be allotted in the programme to games and movement, as well as to free activity, both

¹ Primary Education. London, HMSO, 1959. Pp. 32-34.

indoor and outdoor, with the result that there is need for more space than in the ordinary school and for a garden in which the children can run, climb, play with water and sand as well, if possible, grow plants and care for animals. It is also necessary that the premises offer special guarantee in connection with hygiene and safety.

It is suggested that the Fijian-type bures approximately 30 feet by 25 feet would ideally suit for conducting pre-primary classes. A bure of this type and size would conveniently accommodate more than 50 children. Moreover, erecting a bure of this size would not cost very much. Local materials could be used and the bure could be built co-operatively by the parents. Pre-primary schools should be situated away from traffic dangers and in a place which is healthy from both the moral and the physical points of view. In the villages these pre-primary schools should be situated near the village primary schools.

Pre-Primary Teachers

The staff members of the pre-primary school play many parts and all should form a close-knit community led by the superintendent, or the teacher in charge. In a school of sixty children, there should be a superintendent, an assistant teacher and two helpers, both of whom should possess the necessary training in the care of young children. The number of children per teacher would depend on finance and the availability of suitably qualified teachers.¹ Even the cook and caretaker should play a part far beyond their actual duties. And in a town where there would be more than one

¹Number of children per teacher. "This varies between a minimum of 10 to 15 (Australia, German Federal Republic, Honduras, India, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Paraguay, Switzerland, United States, Yugoslavia) and a maximum of 40 to 50 (Afghanistan, Greece, India, Guatemala, Iran, Israel, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, Philippines)." Organization of Pre-Primary Education. Op.cit. Pp. 28-29.

unit, one common superintendent may be appointed for all units, with the headteacher and assistants for each.

A pre-primary teacher should possess the right temperament and a pleasant voice and good speech; she should have a real love and respect for children and should be a person of imagination, understanding, sympathy and balance. As Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in England, in their book "Primary Education" (Suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others concerned with the work of Primary schools) observe:

A nursery school teacher has to create an atmosphere which is serene and comforting. She needs patience and understanding of when to participate or interfere in the children's doings and when to stand by or stand aside. Above all she needs a genuine affection for children and an interest which is something more than professional. She has to win the confidence both of the children and of their parents; in addition to these qualities, she needs the knowledge and skill which a full professional training gives.¹

Until such time as the professionally qualified pre-primary teachers are available, it is suggested that the pre-primary schools be established with the teachers who have had the normal primary teacher training course. Usually there would be one or two mothers in a village who were once teachers in a primary school but had to give it up when they got married and had children. It is suggested that the village pre-primary schools be staffed by such mothers, and even when qualified teachers are available, the services of such mothers should not be dispensed with.

Parent-Teacher Relationship

The pre-primary teacher should make every effort to encourage the active interest of parents in the education of their children.

¹ Primary Education. Op.cit. P. 26.

The mother, and to a lesser extent, the father, are the child's first teachers; they have their children with them during the first few years of their lives. Even after the child enters the pre-primary school he is under the direct supervision and care of the teacher for only about one-third of his waking hours. Finally it must be assumed that the parents have the greater desire than anybody else to give their children a good start in school.

For all these reasons and also because they pay for what the schools offer, it is a wise teacher who recognises the significant contributions parents can make. It is necessary that each individual parent get to know the teacher, and understand what the teacher is trying to do, and understand something of the methods employed. The teacher, too, can be assisted in the understanding of each individual child in the class by a full knowledge of the home environment and the attitudes of the parents. Mutual understanding of a common problem results from close contact between teacher and parent. By securing this interest teachers can stimulate among the parents an interest in the schools and a desire for their improvement (a willingness to accept what sacrifice may be necessary for the improvements in buildings, equipment and teachers' salaries).

Parenthood Education. Educators have long recognised that the child's education begins at home - in the years before he goes to school. During these early years the child should learn many things to help him make a happy adjustment when he starts to school. Parents are the teachers in this period of childhood and their understanding guidance can greatly influence the child's readiness for school.

The teachers of pre-primary schools can do a lot to help parents better understand the responsibility of the home in guiding

the child's early learning experiences. In the day-to-day living before school, opportunities may be provided a child to develop a strong healthy body, an alert mind, enjoyment of friends of his own, increasing independence in thinking and action and a sense of well-being in living.

It is suggested that opportunities for educating the parents be arranged through parent-teacher association, conferences and visits to their homes. Among the subjects which might be discussed in such series of contacts, the following will be of interest to parents:

1. Early child care: Formation of good bodily habits; balanced diets; clothing. (Fortunate is the child whose parents assist him in carrying out a schedule where routine habits fall into their proper relationship with the rest of his daily programme.)

2. Health check-up: to protect a child's health, an annual health check-up with the doctor should be arranged to make sure that any physical defects are discovered early and corrected; the child is vaccinated and immunized for certain childhood diseases. A visit to the dentist is also a matter not to be overlooked.

3. Encouraging a child to grow in independence through allowing time and opportunity for him to carry responsibility for such simple things as: dressing and undressing himself; hanging up his wraps; caring for his toilet needs; putting his toys and personal possessions away; helping in simple family chores; going on errands; meeting visitors in the home; entering into the table conversation.

4. Games and play-mates: ample opportunities for play and games must be provided. A wise parent fits up the backyard, if he has one, or finds a play area for his child in a

neighbourhood playground to provide the space he requires for using his body. Swings, ladders, sandboxes, planks, and boxes are the tools of play, wonderful aid for muscle building, too. Inevitably this equipment will attract other children to the yard, and the result will be to provide lessons in sharing, exchanging ideas, leading and following, all of which are necessary experiences for a child in learning to get along with others.

5. Encouraging a child to learn to talk: As a child is learning to use language, he needs to hear words spoken clearly and in correct grammatical construction. Parents must give the child every opportunity to practise correct speech and ease in expression. Talking to him, telling stories, going on trips, and listening to him when he talks are avenues for helping the child to acquire and use the language with ease and facility.

Conclusion

The initiative to organise pre-primary education in Fiji should come from the parents. The Department of Education should encourage the establishment of pre-primary schools and should be responsible for training pre-primary teachers and for the supervision and inspection of pre-primary education throughout the Colony. The Department of Education should subsidise building costs and meet 25 percent of teachers' salaries.

In the villages, the village school committees should be responsible for erecting bures for conducting pre-primary education and for raising funds from the parents. In towns and cities, voluntary bodies, churches, etc. should organise and conduct pre-primary schools.

The pre-primary school is intended to provide the pre-school child with the opportunity to become adjusted to school life.

Instruction is informal in character and concerns itself with the development of readiness for learning and the promotion of desirable attitudes and behaviour. The spirit of play should be utilized. This is the period of transition when the child is taken away from the care of its mother into a different environment.

The proper understanding of the parents of what the teachers are attempting to do for their children and why they try to do it in a particular way, is important at all times, but never more so than on the occasion of the child's first attendance at school. The pre-primary school should, therefore, establish close contact with the home. The teacher should know the parents and home conditions of each child and should secure the goodwill of the family. The parents should feel that they play an important part in the total plan of education. Opportunities to visit the school during its everyday work are means of cultivating interest in the school and an understanding of its work.