

The Nain Daycare Project

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Given the unique opportunity to develop a preschool in an isolated environment we developed a simple but effective model. This was to meet the projected needs of the community rather than our own, fully integrate all children, overlap program planning with primary teachers and preschool staff, involve parents, create a community resource centre for parent support, and incorporate the cultural heritage into the day-to-day program. While the success of the program can only be evaluated over a long period of time, the indications are that the preschool program not only works (i.e., meets the goals we set for it) but also has become widely accepted in a community where education has not been a high priority.

Ayant été offert une occasion unique celle d'ouvrir un centre préscolaire dans un milieu isolé, on développe un modèle simple mais efficace. Ce projet devait répondre aux besoins de la communauté plutôt qu'à nos besoins prévus, devait intégrer tous les enfants, correspondre à la planification des programmes des enseignants du primaire et le personnel du centre, impliquer les parents, créer un centre de ressources communautaires utile aux parents et incorporer des éléments du patrimoine culturel dans le programme quotidien. Alors qu'il faudra attendre un certain temps avant de pouvoir évaluer le succès du programme, on peut voir que le programme préscolaire fonctionne bien (c'est-à-dire qu'on atteint les objectifs) et qu'il est largement accepté par une communauté où l'éducation n'a pas toujours été une priorité.

This paper will describe the early years of a recently established daycare centre in Northern Labrador which was designed to alleviate the lack of success that Native children typically experience in elementary school. The Paivitsiak Centre, the first preschool program in Northern Labrador, was begun in Nain in 1980. Nain is the most northern and the largest Inuit community in Labrador with a combined population of Native people (Inuit) and settlers (people of European background who have lived in Labrador for at least a century) of 1000.

The impetus for a preschool centre came from the community's women's group. The centre was established for several reasons. Women who were entering the labour force needed daycare facilities, and, as is the case in many communities, the centre was seen as an appropriate place to help children prepare for later schooling. In addition, however, the women's group believed daycare could be used to develop in the children a strong sense of their culture's worth.

One possible reason why the daycare centre has been successful to date is that it was initiated and established by a very active community group.

This women's group was already well established with a clear aim of improving life for children and families. From its inception, these women viewed parents and other community members (e.g., Native groups, school teachers, school administrators, and government and health personnel) as well as themselves not only as service recipients but also as direct contributors to and resources for the program. For example, parents and community members were asked to become involved in establishing the children's program by sitting on the centre's board of directors.

While evaluating the program's success will be a long-term endeavour, there are, even at this early stage, several trends which support the conclusion that the initial steps taken to establish the program were well conceived. For example, there is full enrollment, and most of the children are Inuit and settlers rather than children of southerners working in the community. The preschool has been given the support of a broad base of Native groups, government, school officials and teachers, and other community members. Most children in this community must complete two years in school (i.e., Kindergarten and Pre-Grade 1) before entering Grade 1. Seven of the first eight children who were to enter school after attending the preschool for one year were tested and went directly into Pre-Grade 1. All seven advanced to Grade 1 after their first year in school.

The summary of the training and program models which follows may help facilitate the implementation and success of similar programs which are being or will be established in northern, isolated communities. It may also highlight ways of bridging the gap between preschool and elementary school programs prevalent in many less isolated communities.

TEACHER TRAINING

A factor which appears to contribute significantly to the success of the program is the training of the daycare teachers. The group did not want the preschool to imitate the elementary school where outsiders are brought in to teach the children. They wanted continuity of culture and experiences, something which could only be given by northern people. Since no individuals in the community were trained in early childhood education, the women's group sought preschool teacher training for local women from the region's only university-based early childhood education program, 1 500 miles to the south. Consequently, the Chairperson of the Department of Child Study of Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Nova Scotia) visited the community, met and exchanged ideas with members of the Nain Women's Group, and subsequently designed a training program based on the specific needs of the Nain community.

One of the important considerations here was that, because of the

cultural and geographic differences, the responsibility for defining what was required was placed primarily with the Nain residents. On the basis of the needs outlined earlier, a program was developed which minimized travel and relocation problems for the consultants. Five faculty gave short (two- or three-week) intensive courses in child development, methods of teaching young children, program development, parent involvement, and administration of early childhood programs. The centre opened in July and, after approximately two months in operation, there were three follow-up sessions with faculty travelling to the community. The first session addressed children with special needs; the second addressed bilingual programming. The latter is extremely important in this community where Inuktituk is the Native language but English is the language of instruction in the schools. The third session focused on the day-to-day operation and administration of the centre.

After the program had operated for a year, the supervisor and a staff member attended a month-long program in Halifax. Consistent with the program model, the teachers were placed firmly at the centre in designing the continuing education program. After a year's operation, the teachers were best able to see the gaps in their knowledge and the additional needs made evident over the year. Particularly important here is the fact that these people have no resource persons in early childhood education available in their community, and they are a two-hour airplane journey from the nearest early childhood centre.

This in-service work focused on bilingual programming, programming for special-needs children, and parent and community involvement. Although these topics were part of the original training, everyone felt that more preparation in these areas would contribute to a better program. Because these sessions were held in Halifax, the centre staff were able to observe a variety of programs for young children in the metropolitan area. They also could meet experienced professionals who offer ancillary services to daycare centres. There are no services beyond basic medical support in Nain, and problems such as language delays and disorders, cerebral palsy, and hearing difficulties are fairly common. These meetings offered unique opportunities to discuss problems with speech and language pathologists, audiologists, physiotherapists, and psychologists.

THE CHILDREN'S PROGRAM

Paivitsiak Centre offers full- and part-day programs primarily for children aged 2 to 5 years, although older children with special needs are also accepted. The program is based on a cognitive/developmental approach

using Piaget's theory as a foundation for program development (e.g., Flavell, 1963; Ginsburg & Oppen, 1969; Piaget, 1970). In keeping with Piaget's views of development, the emphasis is on activity, diversity, and change. This viewpoint prescribes a learning environment with a variety of materials and activities available for exploration. The teacher's role is to enhance the child's own construction of knowledge through interactions with the environment. Direct instruction is used in the teaching of specific skills and information (e.g., colours, shapes, and letters). Such a method has the advantage over exploration in allowing these children to know exactly what they have learned.

However, aspects of a behavioural/environmental approach (Evans, 1975) are also used to develop pre-academic and social skills. For example, principles of reinforcement are used to expand children's attention spans, especially when they first enter the preschool. In developing social skills, generally inappropriate behaviour is ignored while desirable behaviour is frequently reinforced.

Many of the children's activities are similar to those utilized in most preschool programs, but the actual content reflects the northern Inuit environments. Books read and stories told to the children depict Inuit myths, legends, and other tales of living in the north. Similarly, games played are often the traditional string and bone games of the Inuit. Such activities have the added advantage of developing in the children an appreciation of and a pride in their cultural heritage.

The centre is what is currently referred to as *fully integrated*. However, the concept of *integration* is foreign to this culture. In the community of Nain, age or ability is not a barrier to community involvement. Thus, people are not segregated into old-young, handicapped-non-handicapped, or bright-dull groups, and this egalitarian attitude is reflected in the centre. The children are not grouped by age as they are most often in the south. There are some age-grouped activities, but in general all children play together in close proximity. Similarly, children with special needs receive extra guidance, but they are not kept apart from other children. Indeed, the children, reflecting their cultural habits, mix freely regardless of age or ability. The centre also provides emergency care, and the rapid acceptance of new children reflects the ease of movement within the community. Since independence and acceptance of responsibility are encouraged in the home and centre, children are often seen offering help to the centre's younger or less able children.

Affection is given freely and spontaneously, and the overall atmosphere is positive and relaxed. The small size of the community allows the staff to know the children and their families intimately. They are alert to matters affecting any member of a family which may also affect the child. Thus, the centre is an extension of the home and not a "school" for young

children, a concept which might have significance for other urban preschools. The centre is a home away from home which gives children the opportunity to develop and learn in an atmosphere that supports their culture and community while fostering a positive attitude toward learning activities.

PARENT/GRANDPARENT INVOLVEMENT

At the beginning of the project, it was decided that two of the seven members of the centre's board of directors must be parents. In practice, the family representation has always been higher since some members representing other community agencies are also parents or grandparents. In this culture, grandparents play a significant role in their grandchildren's lives, often living in the same house, and thus their involvement in the preschool is encouraged. Since research results have shown that giving parents decision-making power in their children's programs effectively increases their feeling of control, persistence, and a positive attitude toward education (e.g. Hoffman, 1971; Lally, 1971), there may be secondary gains that will be particularly important for this community.

Parent and grandparent participation also provides the program with valuable resources and ideas, helping to ensure the needed continuity between home and the preschool. Requests for assistance in making toys, story books, and equipment have been met with a very positive response. The parents and grandparents are encouraged to take part in the daily activities of the centre, particularly those that relate directly to the culture of the Inuit. For example, they are asked to contribute to language activities by telling the children stories of the traditional life. Or they may be asked to display their artistic abilities by doing bone carvings or embroidery.

At the same time, these community members have the opportunity to observe the centre's activities, something which allows for communication and promotes cooperation and continuity between the home and the preschool. To encourage more active participation in the day-to-day curriculum, family members are invited to parent evenings and to special celebrations at the centre. Such participation also helps to extend the program into the home environment. This factor is reported to be necessary for the preschool experience to have long-term beneficial effects (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Porter, 1982).

PROFESSIONAL / COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The centre's staff has continued to encourage and welcome input from other professionals involved in the care of children and families. In

addition to the centre's director and two parents, the board of directors consists of the Public Health Department nurse, the Department of Social Services social worker, and the president and the coordinator of the Nain Women's Group. While all board members have the improvement of life for children and families as a first priority, their varied backgrounds have gradually contributed to an integrated approach to reaching the overall goal.

The public health nurse is responsible for the health of the community's children. She is a valuable resource for identifying the children most in need of the preschool experience since she frequently visits many of the community's homes. Her recommendation of the program is often met with a positive response. She visits the centre on a regular basis and provides much direction on the physical care of children. Her intimate knowledge of both the program and the needs of the children entering it is invaluable in ensuring that the centre will meet the needs of the community. Similarly, the social worker's presence on the board enables the government, which provides subsidies to families unable to afford the centre's fees, so provide input and observe the program and its effectiveness, which may, in turn, result in increased subsidies.

The president and coordinator of the Nain Women's Group provide much valuable information concerning the needs of Native families and how their needs may be met. These women also ensure the support of other Native groups as well as general community support.

PRESCHOOL / SCHOOL LIAISON

A very significant liaison has developed between the preschool and the school. Communication between these two would seem very important, but it is probably relatively rare. It is particularly important in this community in which children's poor school performance appears partly a result of the discrepancy between the child's culture and that of the school. There is a very high rate of teacher turnover in the elementary school, and there are no licensed Inuit teachers. The teachers come without knowledge of the northern and Inuit culture and do not remain long enough to become familiar with it. Therefore, they cannot begin to bridge the gap between the culture represented by the school environment and that of the children. School remains a foreign place for northern children, and they typically perform poorly and drop out early (Borlase, 1982). Besides providing school-preparatory experiences, the preschool teachers also help by informing teachers about the level of development and abilities of children entering school and the experiences of these children during the preschool years.

The cooperation between the school and the preschool is particularly evident in the case of young school-aged children with special needs. The community's school is short of teachers and overcrowded. Because it is difficult for the school to provide education for all handicapped children and because the laws do not require that all children, regardless of ability, be educated, children are sometimes kept at home with essentially no outside services for a much longer period than is the case elsewhere. However, the school and centre have begun to share responsibility for two school-aged children with special needs (i.e., cerebral palsy and developmental delay) by each caring for them for part of the day. Their programs are planned jointly by school and centre teachers to ensure continuity and quality of care. This exchange of ideas also benefits the preschool teachers who experience the satisfaction of participating in a professional community of interdependent interests. It helps as well to mitigate the professional isolation so often reported by preschool personnel (Watt, 1983).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Plans are currently being made to extend the services offered by the preschool teachers to include a toy-lending library, weekly parent-toddler and preschool groups, and parent information sessions for all interested people in the community. The number of spaces available will be increased from 20 to 30. Yearly in-service training will be sought with the expectation that eventually all teachers will be fully qualified and that they in turn will help to train other community members wishing to become preschool teachers.

The effectiveness of the program in terms of improving children's performance at school can only be evaluated over a long period of time. However, the indications are that the preschool not only works (i.e., meets the goals set for it) but also has become widely accepted in a community where education has not been a high priority.

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Angesichts der besonderen Gelegenheit eine Vorschule in einer abgelegenen Umgebung zu entwickeln, haben wir ein einfaches aber wirksames Modell entwickelt. Dieses Modell bestand daraus, die Forderungen der Gemeinde statt unsere vorgesehenen anzuwenden, alle Kinder völlig zu integrieren, die Programmplanung der Grundschullehrer und Vorschullehrer ineinander übergreifen zu lassen, die Eltern mit einzuziehen, ein Gemeinschaftsquellenzentrum zur Unterstützung der Eltern einzurichten und kulturelles Erbgut ins tägliche Programm einzuarbeiten. Obwohl der Erfolg dieses Programmes erst über eine lange Zeitspanne beurteilt werden kann, sind Anzeichen vorhanden, daß das Vorschulprogramm nicht nur wirksam ist (d.h. daß die Ziele, die wir gesetzt haben, erreicht werden), sondern auch weithin in einer Gesellschaft akzeptiert wird, in der die Ausbildung nicht an erster Stelle stand.

Dada la oportunidad de desarrollar una jardinería en un ambiente aislado, hemos desarrollado un modelo simple pero eficaz. Este consistió en utilizar las necesidades de la comunidad más bien que las que nosotros habríamos proyectado, integrar todos los niños, sobrelapar la planificación de programas con maestros de primaria y personal de jardinería, involucrar a los padres, crear un centro de recursos comunitario para respaldar a los padres, e incorporar la herencia cultural en el programa diario. Si bien el éxito del programa sólo podrá evaluarse luego de un largo período de tiempo, las indicaciones ahora son de que no solamente el programa funciona (es decir cumple las metas establecidas) sino de que es muy bien aceptado en una comunidad donde la educación no tenía alta prioridad.

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