

The crisis in the Sydney pre-schools

By R. A. CHAMPION

ALTHOUGH the crisis in pre-school education raises issues which are not obvious from the examination of the immediate problem in Sydney, this situation will be considered first. This crisis involves pre-schools run by the Kindergarten Union and the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association.

Teachers in these schools are fully trained by three years in college. In addition, the schools of the association provide full day care which is invaluable for working mothers. For some time the Kindergarten Union and the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association have been in financial difficulties because they have attempted to provide a high quality service at reasonable rates, with little government assistance.

They have been able to survive by keeping salaries to a minimum but this has forced many

teachers to leave. The situation will be brought to a head if trained teachers receive long overdue wage rises in the near future. In this event the schools may be forced to close, or at least to reduce their numbers of trained staff, unless financial support was obtained, presumably from the government.

The attitude of the government and the population at large is very much the same towards pre-schools as it is towards education in general, although (if this is possible) it may be less enlightened because there is no obvious material return for the investment.

An incredible gulf exists between what should be and what exists; the gulf will become even wider if aid is not supplied almost immediately. Two types of assistance are needed. First, immediate help to keep the system going, even if it is hopelessly inadequate. Hence there is also a need for a long range plan—to work towards the goal of universal opportunity for pre-school education.

The present system is so inadequate that it seems wildly optimistic even to talk about universal pre-school education (with fully trained teachers), but the case for this goal needs to be made out.

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

This is really a case for the OPPORTUNITY of universal pre-school education because some children may be better off at home; in any case the system should not be made compulsory.

Much of this argument is taken from a book by Willem van der Eyken, "The Pre-School Years" (Penguin, 65c). Though the information and the ideas in this book are not original they are presented in such a lucid and forceful manner that large tracts of the book will be quoted or paraphrased.

"The central thesis of this book is that if we are really serious about educating our youth, then our efforts should be concentrated on a group who are at present not included in the system at all. They are, quite simply, young children."

This concern arises from recent findings that a "rich" environment has a marked effect on the mental development of the child. This effect is most marked in the early stages of the child's life when its brain and its intelligence are developing at the fastest rate.

"These are critical facts, for on the use we make of them depends the quality of the people our education system sets out to develop. We are no longer talking about the possibility of making certain provisions for

young children but instead are debating the kind of society we desire, the kind of priorities within that society which will be advanced, the kind of life we wish to be pursued. They are issues which move out of the realm of education and concern the very fabric of our civilisation. In that sense they are universal and timeless."

But what then is a "rich" environment? Can we organise this? Is it conceivable to do so for all children?

A rich environment is one which provides the child with a wide range of sensations and social contacts; in addition there needs to be a great deal of individual attention and encouragement. An enriched environment, which can be arranged in a properly organised pre-school, involves several important features. First it must be child centred. This means that the physical facilities are cut down to child size and there are none of the hazards which surround children in homes where they must be continually told to 'leave that alone,' 'don't touch,' 'go and see what your little sister is doing and tell her to stop it,' etc.

Teachers are there to help and encourage, not to contain and frighten. Constant interaction is maintained between the children and the teachers. This is an advance on earlier concepts of pre-school education where children were left to play by themselves, with teachers only around to deal with problems that arose. The emphasis is now on constant interaction but for this to be effective there must be a low child/teacher ratio and the teachers must be specially trained. The children are encouraged to learn by experience and experiment which involves a wide range of activities organised to provide the maximum possible contact with materials, colours, and sounds.

The overall objective is to facilitate the total development of the child, i.e. integrated intellectual, emotional, social and physical development. This objective can only be approached in a child centred system with adequate facilities and staff.

This type of pre-school can be made available for all children just as soon as the community decides that it is desirable to do so.

Every child can benefit by this type of environment, especially through the socialisation learned in group play. This will not be learned if the play is made competitive. It is certainly not fostered by the viciously competitive examination systems in primary and secondary schools. And it is particularly important to arrange an improved environment for children who live in uncongenial physical, mental or emotional situations.

High rise development has tended so far to produce special problems for young children and their mothers. Children crave space to play which is denied in many new blocks of home units. A survey was carried out in a block of new flats in London revealed that though the view, privacy and the reduced noise level were satisfactory the mothers were preoccupied with safety and the lack of socialisation and educational opportunities for young children. Most of the mothers wanted some sort of playroom and many wanted a nursery school.

"The modern environments that we are creating in this way are not the friends of children, indeed the architects who are creating them have scarcely thought about the needs of the young who will live their first, impressionable years in these hollow towers . . . they deprive a child of what is probably the most important single influence in his younger years—the informal and casual contact not only with other children of their own age, but with adults and older children. . . In the end the indictment of these environments is simply that they are anti-child; that they demand of the young a type of behaviour—acquiescent, silent, estranged—that is the very anti-thesis of the inherent nature of the child."

This, of course, does not have to be the case.

There are some indications from overseas that the mental environment is degenerating at the same time as the physical environment. Van der Eyken spoke to teachers in reception classes at infant schools in Great Britain and his findings are disturbing:

"They all said that five-year-olds who come to school today have none of the rich sub-culture of fairy stories, games, rhymes and tales that children used to possess. Instead they were armed with a veneer of television culture and advertising copy that had no depth, humour or applicability to their own situation.

"More important, perhaps, is that they do not enjoy conversation in the home. The result is that many infant teachers find that the children who come to school for the first time at the age of five, or approaching their fifth birthday, often have great difficulty in verbally communicating either with other children or the staff. This leads of frustration, feelings of inferiority, and in turn provides a handicap in learning to read."

No doubt most readers of this journal make special efforts to read and also to speak to their

children, so that van der Eyken's comments may seem exaggerated. However the situation is not the same in all households. Pre-schools have something special to offer children who are in any way underprivileged or deprived; this includes children in lower class districts, migrant children and Aborigines.

Pre-schools offer these children a particularly valuable opportunity to learn the language. This task becomes progressively more difficult as the child grows older. After the age of about four (which is still before the child goes to primary school) it is extremely hard to learn the language without laborious remedial coaching.

On the other hand, in the relaxed atmosphere of a properly organised pre-school, while the child is young, the language can be learned with remarkable ease. This has far-reaching consequences for children from depressed backgrounds.

"It has been suggested that there are, in fact, two languages, and that many children, because they do not come into close contact with children outside their own social class, or because they are not spoken to enough, are limited in their early years to only one of these forms, to the future detriment of their intellectual development."

Many Australian children live in an environment which is flat and dull both verbally and musically. This probably accounts for the air of unreality which descends during formal lessons on drama, literature, and particularly poetry. It may not be possible to learn to appreciate these things without some sort of early exposure and formal teaching of the fine arts usually manages to kill any spark of interest that may have survived early deprivation.

"Middle class children are brought up in an environment where language is often quite formal, and where thoughts are expressed in such a way that the person expressing them is not necessarily identified with the thoughts. Working class environments, on the other hand, are characterised by a form of speech that is very direct, unambiguous, and closely identified with the speaker.

"It is notable that among poorly-educated but intelligent people, it is their inability to express themselves precisely enough which leads them, almost in frustration, but perhaps inevitably, to talk in absolute terms—and absolute terms lead to violence and hatred.

"For the working class, language that is sufficient for life in a crowded terrace house is not sophisticated enough to cope with the

demands that a more formalised school education make upon the individual. So a working-class child entering school—itsself a middle class institution stocked with teachers drawn from the middle classes—not merely begins at a disadvantage, but arrives with social inequality built into him; an inequality that could be ameliorated by the kind of wider social contact that nursery school provides, with the encouragement there of the use of language, so often curtailed or even expressly forbidden in autocratic families.

In this way, an expanded system of pre-schools could strike at one of the main contributing factors to current inequalities in education. Children who are not fluent with the languages are at a hopeless disadvantage in competition for places in the progressive streams of secondary schools. The academic ceiling of the average child may well be fixed by the nature of his environment in his early years, particularly the pre-school years.

There is another type of child who can derive special benefit from pre-school—the emotionally deprived or 'twilight child.' The existence of these children is a problem which is only just being fully appreciated overseas, where some evidence suggests that as many as 15% of children may have emotional problems which deserve some special attention. At present these problems only become recognised later, at primary or secondary school. Only a few of the most serious cases are detected in this way, and these are the cases which are least likely to respond to attention. These children can be helped far more effectively in pre-school, provided that the teachers are adequately trained to detect and help them.

The particular benefits which deprived and underprivileged children can gain from pre-school should not divert attention from the evidence which suggests that ALL children can gain from this type of opportunity, provided that the teachers are trained and facilities are adequate.

THE SITUATION IN SYDNEY.

The situation in Australia is very well covered by Yvonne Preston in a pair of articles in the "Financial Review" (October 14-15, 1969). Particular attention was paid to New South Wales because the situation was so much worse than elsewhere with the possible exception of Queensland.

In N.S.W. only three per cent. of children between the ages of three and five are enrolled at licensed centres. There is no indication of what happens to the under threes, of the number of

unlicensed services, or the incidence of 'baby farming.' Out of more than 500 licensed centres only about 150 have trained teachers. The gravity of this situation is not apparent unless the importance of properly qualified teachers is realised. This is not universally appreciated. For example the Minister for Social Services suggested recently that pensioners could perhaps be recruited to mind children.

The situation has been aggravated by lack of foresight and co-ordination on the part of government departments. The Housing Commission has built blocks of home units at Redfern without playgrounds or nursery schools, although there are statutory requirements for parking space.

The Immigration Department is bringing in more migrants with little apparent concern about what is going to happen to them, or to their children when they arrive. At the same time the Education Department and the Department of Labour are calling for more women to join the work force, and the Commonwealth Treasury Bulletin for 1965 predicted that by 1976, 46% of married women will be working. This is supposed to be necessary for the continued growth of the economy. It may be realised by then that this

rate of growth is not needed to improve living conditions, but in the meantime the pressure on the pre-school system will be intensified.

The Kindergarten Union and the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association are particularly hard pressed because they maintain high standards which the other schools and minding centres rarely equal.

They are not being run to make a profit. They aim to provide a service at reasonable rates. They are prepared to allow reduced rates, subject to a means test, which is helpful in particular, for unmarried mothers and deserted wives.

The main reason for the financial stress in the Kindergarten Union and the Day Nurseries Association is the miserly State Government aid.

In Victoria and in the ACT the government pays the whole of the teachers' salaries and assists with the building of the schools. In N.S.W. the government provides much less and the pre-schools have kept going by keeping salaries down and skimping on equipment and facilities. This cannot go on for ever. There is a steady drain of teachers who leave for better jobs, and all this is going on at a time when the system should be expanding, not struggling for survival.
