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Preschool education: an interventionist strategy in poverty
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PRESCHOOL EDUCATION - AN INTERVENTIONIST STRATEGY IN POVERTY

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INTRODUCTION

In looking at preschool education as a possible vehicle for intervention in poverty, poverty is defined neither simply as an economic manifestation; nor as a sub-culture to the mainstream culture - these definitions are only half the truth.

The definition of poverty used in this paper is "as a condition resulting from social, political, economic and psychological forces which hamper the upward mobility of the poor." In other words poverty is seen as a culture of deprivation, in which the individual or group is denied the resources and the opportunities for upward mobility. It implies not only a lack of economic resources and the extrinsic features associated therewith, but also a limitation of opportunities to choose from, inadequate homes, poor schools, insufficient and restricted places of recreation, the denial of power and opportunities (be these social or political) for meaningful participation in a decision-making process.

In terms of such an understanding of the phrase "the culture of deprivation", every person of colour in this country falls into the category of the poor/deprived. Here prevails a situation, where a person of colour might have economic means (most do not) but his aspirations are severely curtailed. The political system dictates who his parents should be, where he may live, where he may work, the kind of work he may engage in, the education he may receive, the beaches he may use, the recreation he may enjoy, whom he may marry and where he may be buried when he dies. The opportunities for him are most decidedly constrained. This leads to a hopelessness which is difficult to overcome.
However, behind the extrinsic features of the culture of deprivation, behind the apparent inadequacy and complacency of the poor, there is a powerful intrinsic mechanism which makes survival possible. This mechanism has been termed the "survival dynamic," and is in fact a cultural mechanism, effectively utilised by the poor to counteract the difficulties of the poverty situation. It is a positive dynamic which should also be utilised by the interventionist to facilitate the process of social change in the culture of deprivation.

This survival dynamic operates on both the individual and community level. On the individual level it is evident in how he makes do with the barest minimum of resources; the way he fends off insults to his dignity and provides shelter for his children, no more clearly displayed than in a squatter camp after a police raid in which the humble makeshift shelters are completely destroyed and then quickly rebuilt.

On the community level it is displayed in the ad hoc soccer games, where a tightly wrapped parcel of paper acts as the ball, stones as posts and the street as the pitch. This same dynamic was displayed in a group of residents who wanted to clear two fields as playgrounds for their children. They had no formal organisation, no meeting room, except the street; but they had a committed desire to do something for themselves as a group.

In the same way groups of individuals come together, with their aspirations raised by what they have seen elsewhere, deeply committed to start a community preschool. They have no experience; no technical know-how; no money; but the guts necessary for survival.

This survival dynamic is particularly important in the sphere of the care and protection of children. "The poor" have aspirations for their children and desire for them a better future than they presently experience themselves. They believe too that the only hope for them is education. If education can be acquired by their children, at least
some of the resources of which they are deprived can be attained by their children. This attitude makes intervention, through preschool education, not only possible but also acceptable.

The most popular education intervention strategy employed in the sixties was "compensatory education". The designers of this model had tremendous enthusiasm but evidence today shows that "compensatory education" did not enjoy the success which was anticipated. A popular model today is "positive discrimination" in education. What positive discrimination does is to at least widen educational opportunities for the poor by the unequal provision of education resources tipped in their favour. In this way it ultimately makes it possible for the poor to compete for better positions in a social structure based on merit.

The model proposed is the one developed at Grassroots Education Trust. The model is a dynamic one, constantly changing and constantly growing. Being entirely open to criticism, it changes and grows in response rather to the input of the participants than to the intentions of the designers. In this way the model remains relevant to the people it serves.

Through the provision of preschool facilities Grassroots is, in fact, preparing socially disadvantaged children for social change, giving them a reasonable chance to compete in a meritocratic society. The preschool curriculum adopted is that of conventional early childhood education which lays strong emphasis on play. Although there is no overt concentration on stimulation as in the "compensatory education" approach, stimulation is inherent within the play approach of the conventional preschool.

In Grassroots-aided preschool centres at least two conscious approaches are used to ensure good quality care and good quality education. Both these approaches have the ring of positive discrimination in education about them. Firstly Grassroots, through a loan agreement with a local community group, provides the community-based preschool centre with the best possible education equipment.
Secondly the agency employs skillful itinerant teachers or "education advisors" who, as participant observers, tune in to the needs of the community-based preschool centres. A detailed discussion of the role of the "education advisors" will appear later. For the moment it is sufficient to note that their objective is to stimulate the centre's education staff and help them to emerge as makers of their own relevant programmes.

This study recognises that preschool education as a strategy for intervention has limitations. However, it is useful in the preparation for social change although its immediate impact will be only palliative. This strategy of intervention in our model is directed at both the parents and the children.

What will also become apparent is the way Grassroots, through the preschool intervention programme, utilises the vibrancy of the survival dynamic. The agency does not act as a metropole with numerous satellite preschool centres completely dependent on it. Dependency is discouraged at all levels of interaction with the community. The community group takes responsibility and acts autonomously right from the start of their project. The survival dynamic, as experienced throughout the culture of deprivation, is thus used for the administration of the preschool centre to ensure the survival of the project.

THE CASE FOR PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

The importance of preschool education as a vehicle for cognitive and intellectual growth in young children has been demonstrated over and over again. What has also been established is that the children of the poor tend to have less academic success than those of the wealthy. Various reasons have been postulated for this but the consensus of opinion certainly is that intelligence is the result of the interaction of heredity and the environment.
Probably the strongest case for preschool education can be based on the argument of Bloom. After a comprehensive examination of data from longitudinal studies, he concludes that half the IQ measurement of a person of seventeen is already present at the age of four years. This means, therefore, that fifty percent of intellectual growth takes place before the child is four years old.

Bloom also expressed the view that the environment, especially an extreme environment, definitely has an effect on intellectual development during the early years. He writes further: "Although there is relatively little evidence of the effect of changes in the environment on the changes in intelligence, the evidence so far available suggests that marked changes in the environment in the early years can produce greater changes in intelligence than will equally marked changes in the environment, at later periods of development." 1

The positive influence of preschool education has also been demonstrated by Weikart at the Perry Preschool at Ypsilanti. Weikart holds the view that it does not matter what kind of preschool programme is followed, the ultimate gains from preschool education are socially beneficial in later years. 2

Preschool education recognises that the child is an historical character in a given geographic environment with social, political, spiritual, economic and personal problems confronting him. These problems need creative solutions enabling him to adjust to his environment or to change it for a better one. 3 In terms of this view one must agree with Pam Reilly's assertion that preschool education with its emphasis on creativity is in fact a preparation for school and life. 4
Preschool education plays such an important role in the preparation for school and life that it follows that it has the critical ingredients to prepare the children of the poor to have an equal chance to compete on merit for the best positions in the new social structure. At least what preschool education and care does is to counteract the negatives in the social environment of the poor—negatives like malnutrition, poor health, inadequate housing, and the unstimulating similarity of the housing estates in which the poor are forced to live.

THE INTERVENTIONIST STRATEGY

Grassroots Education Trust does not direct a community into active participation in preschool education. The "missionary approach" where the agency, fired by altruism, intervenes in a community and imposes its services in the belief that what they are offering "is good for the people", is unacceptable. The demand for the preschool must emerge from within the community. Only then will the agency respond to the community's call for assistance.

This does not mean that Grassroots Education Trust does not promote the preschool idea. Grassroots in fact was established to generally promote preschool education, and promotion is still inherent in the agency's policy. Promotion, however, must be coupled with demonstration of the capabilities of communities to undertake their own preschool projects. It was for these reasons that Grassroots embarked on the "Establishment of Preschool Centres Programme".

To gain entry and acceptability, prerequisites for intervention in any community, Grassroots embarked on the Adventure Bus Programme. The buses are provided free by a local bus company, and the drivers volunteer their time. This programme, designed to take children from the Cape Flats on "adventure" trips to stimulate their cognitive and intellectual growth by exposing them to more varied environmental experience, soon gained for the agency the
desired community acceptance. Grassroots came to be seen to care, to be interested in the plight of the preschool child. This community acceptance was strengthened by the fact that the drivers, as members of the community, were taking neighbourhood children on adventure bus trips during their spare time. This helped to generate a positive feeling in the community towards the programme and the agency. This possibly explains why, when the community, irritated by busfare increases, turned against the company, it did not attack the Adventure Bus Programme. In fact the Adventure Bus Programme grew in popularity while the community's hostility towards the sponsoring company was at its most intense.

If the Adventure Bus Programme provided Grassroots with entry and acceptance into the community, the Establishment of Preschool Centres Programme certainly gained for the agency community credibility. The operative philosophy behind this programme is community autonomy and community control. The agency's role is essentially that of an enabler, who helps to transpose the community's ideas into practical reality. As a catalyst, the agency functions by posing alternatives which the community has the right to accept or reject.

For Grassroots the object of the exercise is to help the community to satisfy its need for a preschool facility at a cost which the community can afford. No elaborate purpose-built preschool centres are suggested. The community is encouraged to utilise available premises - be it a civic hall, a community centre, a church or church hall, or even a vacant house. The whole idea is that the available capital resources be directed at providing the best possible equipment for good quality education and care.

When a community wishes to build a preschool centre, the simplest and cheapest functional plans are suggested. Good education is more dependent on the quality of interaction in the education delivery process than on the structure of the educational facility.
This does not mean that Grassroots disregards health standards, but these standards must be realistic in terms of community needs.

The Grassroots' approach puts preschool education within the grasp of any neighbourhood or community group. The agency facilitates the process of establishment by either providing bridging capital in the form of a loan, or an outright grant to get the project off the ground. More important, however, is that the Grassroots' approach encourages the emergence of the community from its deprivation culture. It helps to break through their misconception that they have neither the technical know-how nor the means to maintain the preschool facility, and creates a critical realisation that the processes involved in establishing a preschool centre are not beyond their capacity.

The most important development in the Establishment of Preschool Centres Programme was the publication of the six "Educare Handbooks". The word "educare" conveys that the community-based preschool full-day care centre must also have a strong education component. This is in total harmony with the way the community articulates its needs. The preschool centre must be able to accommodate the children while their parents are involved in the business of earning a living.

The "Educare Handbooks" are designed to cover every facet of community preschool administration. It has been divided into six specialised sections, each covered by a specific handbook.

Book One is called "How the Community can run the Centre". It deals with the processes involved in setting up community committees needed for administration; drafting the constitution, describing committee members' roles and responsibilities and meeting procedure. This is a general handbook on committee procedure which need not apply only to a preschool centre.
Book Two is called "Getting Premises". This book attempts to deal with the most confused area in preschool education. Middle-class society has always projected purpose-built preschool centres as the ideal. This at the present cost of building is far beyond the means of most communities in the deprivation culture. Book Two, therefore, discusses the basic requirements of a building to accommodate a preschool. It discusses health and building regulations, innovations acceptable to the authorities, survival techniques in multi-purpose buildings, and for those who desire and can afford it, the procedures involved in building a preschool centre from scratch.

Book Three is called "Getting Registered and Subsidised". As implied, this deals with the entire subject of registration and subsidisation of the preschool centre as well as the regulations governing fundraising. If ever there was a manual which brings bureaucracies nearer to the communities, this is it. Book Three shows communities how they can best take advantage of the bureaucratic process to try to meet their needs.

Book Four, "Looking after the Money", discusses banking procedures, financial record keeping and budgeting. It teaches the importance of accountability and financial planning, vital elements for the continued viability of a project. Like Book One, the principles discussed in Book Four are relevant to any organisation. Book Five is called "Employing Staff", while Book Six, "Running the Educare Centre", takes the reader through a day in the preschool centre.

The "Educare Handbooks" are written in simple English, try to avoid jargon and theory, and concentrate on the practical processes involved in preschool administration. The contents of these books in contrast with most textbooks are, therefore, well within the grasp of the average reader. This makes them easy for the com-
munity to use while providing them with the security of knowledge. They can refer directly to the books should they become uncertain in the implementation process.

What is significant is that the publishing of the "Educare Handbooks" completely hands over the agency's experience and knowledge for community use. In this way the agency's control over the community is minimised. This is the democratisation of knowledge in action. It is through the power of knowledge that most community work agencies control the recipient community. This stands in the way of independence - a community in ignorance is kept dependent and immature.

The Educare Handbooks immediately place the community in a situation where it can satisfy its own needs without the assistance of an outside interventionist agency.

THE PROCEDURES AND PRINCIPLES INVOLVED IN INTERVENTION

If the community still wants Grassroots' intervention, then formal application for assistance must be made. All the community needs to do is to write a letter requesting the agency's involvement. Involvement with Grassroots does not imply a partnership relationship, nor does it imply a relationship of subservience. It is a relationship of dialogue based on trust, hope, understanding, humility, faith and love. This is important, for the whole process of intervention is assisting the community to develop a critical realisation, necessary to pull them out of the culture of deprivation in which they are enmeshed.

There are three types of service which the agency offers. A community group can be offered an interest-free loan as bridging capital to start the preschool; or a grant as funding capital for equipment; and administrative and educational assistance. Administrative and educational assistance are built into the loan or grant services.
Which of the three service contracts it enters into with the community is at the discretion of the agency. Grassroots, however, prefers the loan agreement. The loan is interest-free and is repayable in instalments starting when the established community-based preschool centre receives state subsidisation. There is tremendous wisdom in this arrangement. "The poor" always feel inferior when provided with a handout. They are put in a position where they are made to feel incapable of providing for themselves.

In this way grants tend to undermine the dignity and the self-respect of those in the deprivation culture. A handout by the interventionist agency also gives the agency a greater degree of control. A feeling of community subservience to the agency is in fact generated. This counteracts the development of community control and autonomy which are the governing principles of the interventionist approach. It could, however, be argued that state subsidisation is a form of handout. The essential difference is that the community as tax contributors are entitled to state benefits.

Grassroots does not ignore instances where bridging capital alone will not ensure the continued viability of a community-based project. Consideration is given to the community's ability to generate capital itself. Where no such possibility exists, and the state subsidy will only cover the maintenance of adequate education and care, Grassroots will effect a service contract in which outright funding is provided for the required equipment. This might be regarded as expedient but it is actually a response to the reality of a situation.

It does not matter which service contract is entered into the administrative education and care requirements of the community-based preschool centre are the priorities of the agency. Therefore, the strings attached to any assistance Grassroots renders a community are maintenance of standards in administration, care and education. These strings are not considered a hindrance by the community.
which is concerned about the best for their children. They want to give their children a better chance than they had. In favour of the agency, it does not only make demands but consciously tries to make these demands possible. Through the input of their community workers and "education advisors" the agency places its experience at the disposal of the community.

The community workers and the "education advisors" are constrained in their interaction with the community by the conditions of the administrative agreement, contractually entered into between the community and the agency, and by agency policy. Contractually the community workers have to be present at the executive committee meetings of the controlling bodies of the community-based preschool centres. They do not have the right to vote at these meetings and, therefore, cannot push their own ideas on the committees and thus on the community. They are present at these meetings in an advisory capacity, playing the roles of enabler, stimulator of ideas, facilitator - in the sense of allowing the ideas to flow from the committee members - and educator. As educators, their role is to educate the executive committee in the processes of administration and help it to function independently.

On the community workers rest the responsibility of developing a positive self-image in the members of the committee. In the committee members must be inculcated an understanding, that their poverty and lack of technical knowledge do not prevent them from being persons worthy of respect. This positive self-image is built up firstly by creating the right kind of interaction between the community worker and the community members - a kind of matrix of love, understanding, trust and critical evaluation. Secondly the community worker must involve the community, through dialogue, in a learning process and in problem resolution. The approach should be through "problematizing" as opposed "problem-solving". The distinction lies in the fact that problem-solving can be a passive process for the community. It can be a technocratic device in which the "expert" moves away some distance from
reality, analyses the components of the problem, resolves the difficulties and dictates the most efficient strategy of policy. Meanwhile the community remains static without learning, growing or changing. Thus the function of the community worker as a change agent is defeated.

To "problematize" is to immerse the participants through dialogue in the problem situation and in this way to generate a critical consciousness of the situation. By grappling with the problem in this way, the members of the committee grow in experience and confidence and are helped to emerge from their "culture of silence". In this way the power of knowledge does not remain the privilege of the community workers, but becomes democratised, thus the development of independence is facilitated.

The "education advisors" too are constrained by the conditions of the contract and the policy of the agency. They have the right to enter the community-based preschool centre, interact with the staff and help the principal teacher structure the education programme. No elaborate preschool education programme is suggested. The emphasis which Froebel placed on play is still retained. Play is thus central to the curriculum. Around play are structured story, music and discussion sessions for language development; fine and gross activities for muscular development; concept games, opportunities for creativity and development of the imagination for cognitive and intellectual growth; and social activities for the establishment of good relationships. The aim is the development of the total child.

The "education advisors" in most instances are no better educated than the principal teachers of the preschool centres. They have, however, some practical advantages. Their close contact with the Grassroots Preschool Shop exposes them constantly to an array of innovative educational equipment. They have the back-up of the Grassroots Resource Centre and thus the latest ideas and information in the field of preschool education. Add to this their exposure to a variety of community-based preschool centres which operate in a diversity of buildings, their exposure to a variety
of preschool education approaches, tried and tested by a variety of principal teachers, then one can appreciate the extent of the practical experience they can offer. They are in an ideal position as carriers of ideas between centres.

On the "education advisors" rests the responsibility that the education equipment, either granted by Grassroots or purchased by the community, is put to the best possible use. They have to create the right milieu for dialogue. They too depend on love, humility, hope, faith and trust as the essential elements in their equal dialogue relationship with the principal teachers. Once a relationship of dialogue is established, they can with the principal teachers critically search for the best possible education approach. Because of this relationship of dialogue the "education advisors" are not seen as inspectors. The inspector role is often a hollow loveless one. It is riddled with arrogance and mistrust and functions through instructions rather than through discussions in the search for critical solutions.

Once the relationship of dialogue is truly established, then only can the education advisor play the role of "educator-educatee". Contact with the untrained teaching staff of the preschool centre will be facilitated, because the principal teacher will not feel threatened by her presence and her interaction with the untrained staff. In this way the entire staff gains from the experience of the "education advisor" and the quality of education and care improves.

The degree of interaction of the "education advisors" and community workers with a specific community-based preschool centre, depends on the specific needs of that community. It is the agency's expectation that a community should be able to function totally independently within three years. At the end of this period further intervention should no longer be required and the community worker and "education advisor" can intervene elsewhere.
CONCLUSIONS

What this study has tried to show is that intervention through preschool education is not confined to the preschool child. To improve the quality of education and care, and the quality of administration, intervention on the adult level is absolutely vital. It is the ardent hope of the interventionist agency that the skills acquired by the community in running the preschool centre are transferable to other areas of community involvement in this male-oriented society. This is possibly already happening, for there seems to be a preponderance of males involved in community preschool administration. On the other hand, male involvement in preschool administration could be an indication that community preschool centres provide a natural opening for those males who are otherwise denied the opportunity to participate in the broader decision-making machinery of the socio-political society in which they live. If this is the case then preschool education plays an important role in the preparation for social change.
FOOTNOTES

1. Bloom, B  
   Stability and Change in Human Characteristics  Page 88

2. Schweinhart, L  
   and Weicart, D  
   "Research Report. Can Education make a lasting difference?"  Page 7

3. Compare with Midwinter, E in Education in the Priority Area.

4. Reilly, P  
   "Curriculum: An Overview"  
   No pagination.

5. There is a need for these Handbooks to be translated into Afrikaans and Xhosa.

6. Freire Paulo:  
   Education: The Practice of Freedom  
   Introduction.
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