The integration of pre-school children with learning difficulties
Some prescriptions for Singapore

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Introduction

In an attempt to discuss the somewhat emotive issue of the integration into pre-schools of children with learning difficulties, this paper will focus firstly on the historical antecedents for pre-school education, especially in terms of its provision for minority groups. Thereafter the discussion turns to pre-schoolers with learning difficulties, in particular those difficulties manifest in terms of behaviour difficulties. The major thrust in the paper is the necessity for minor programme modifications and major attitude modifications to pre-schoolers with behavioural difficulties.

A Brief History of Pre-School Education

The History of Pre-school education has mirrored the changes in the societies is has served. In the 1960's, pre-school provision was rediscovered as a mechanism for intervention in the care of minority groups of children. Some of these were seen as unable to benefit from of the riches of their culture and society due to inadequate provision in the home, or, some other external cause such as handicapping conditions within the family. Here assumed cognitive incapacities were to be overcome by the provision of stimulating environments outside of the home. The aim was to resolve inequalities between those who were participants in the creation of wealth, and those who were unable to be. Additionally, attempts were made to equalize educational opportunities, with pre-school programmes instrumental in the early diagnosis of possible developmental disturbances. The most successful of these

programmes though, focused on the advocation of educational objectives and on expert guidance for young children and their parents. (Lazar and Darlington, 1982).

More recently, the trend to identify successful pre-school programmes has been concerned with measures of effectiveness in terms of comparisons between children brought up in the home and those experiencing pre-school, and comparisons between differences in types of programme quality. This has led to a search for other indicators which may be seen to influence the long term effects of pre-schools, such as parental, family, and caregiver influences on the developing pre-school child. (Phillips, McCartney & Scarr, 1987, Holloway & Reichhart-Erikson, 1988, Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1989).

Clearly, pre-school provision has always been commensurate with provision for the needs of all children, and especially children with difficulties.

Children with Behavioural and Emotional Difficulties in Pre-Schools in Singapore

One of the main findings of a recent study conducted by the author, concerns the differences in pre-school teachers' and parents' responses to children with emotional and behaviour problems.

Given the parents' and teachers' knowledge of the typical behaviour patterns of their children, it was decided to investigate selected examples of responses to the children's misbehaviours. This involved providing modifications of the examples of parental response attributions found to be associated with discipline preferences. (Dix et al 1986, 1989).

The parents and teachers were asked a number of questions about the handling of misbehaviours in their children, in particular, the extent to which the behaviour was characteristic, under the child's control, and whether the motive for the child's misbehaviour was directly attributable to the child, or some external factor. In addition, they were asked to respond to questions about typical

behaviour problems in the children. For this purpose, the teachers completed the Pre-school Behaviour Checklist, PBCL., (McGuire & Richman, 1986, 1988), and the parents completed the Behaviour Checklist, BCL., (Richman Stevenson & Graham, 1975).

The results of this study, (Sharpe, 1993), indicated that the teachers appeared to be influenced in their management of such children by a perception of the child as having some responsibility for the handling of his own misbehaviour, and that given the teachers' support and assistance, this should be possible for the child.

The parents though, appeared to be more supportive, given the finding that even though their children have some difficulties, they are not critical, nor are they irritated by their children's behaviour. The parents appeared to account for their action by acknowledging an internal rather than external motive for misbehaviour. This indicates that parents may feel that this behaviour is within the child's own nature, his way of being himself, and the parents appeared to be accepting of this.

These findings appear to be in line with the those of Dix et al., (1986, 1989), that parents are less punitive if they perceive the behaviour is beyond the child's control. However, the finding in the Singapore study, that pre-school teachers may be influenced by other attributions may be more alarming for children with behaviour difficulties, given Zajdeman and Minnes, (1991) finding that pre-school teachers may be less supportive of such children than their parents, and that the negative effects may have long term consequences for these children.

The major finding that parents are supportive of their children and do not appear to rate their children's behaviours with the same concern as the teachers, compares well with research in Britain.

In considering attitudes to punishment, Newth & Corbett (1993), found that compared with others, parents of Asian origin were much less likely to be punitive, and were more corrective in their management techniques, especially with younger children who were regarded as being too young to understand. A further finding in this study, of fewer behaviour problems in the Asian children, especially

in terms of management of the difficulties, is attributed to the more stable home environment, where even with larger families, and more material disadvantages, the positive support of the extended family and indulgent attitudes appeared to be significant.

Conclusion

Given the possibility then, that teachers rather than parents, may be more influential in affecting the early social and emotional adjustment of the young child, attention to pre-school teachers' roles may be desirable, especially when children are perceived by parents as well as teachers as exhibiting certain kinds of behaviours which are difficult to control and to understand. In the first instance, heightened awareness of the responsibilities of pre-school teachers for the social, and emotional adjustment to pre-school care and education, could be an urgent priority. Furthermore, if the prescriptions from the Singapore study reported here, lead to some further interest in measures of quality in pre-school provision, in terms of measures of social adjustment of children and its long terms effects, this may serve to create expectations and objective criteria for pre-school staff to aspire to.

Nevertheless, whatever difficulties young children may experience in pre-school, a number of prescriptions have been offered, not least an overall recommendation that teachers analyse tasks as they challenge children, and assess the extent to which any individual child's problem is different from that confronting any other pre-school child. In this regard, Rutter, (1980), offers a number of considerations in a whole school approach accommodating children with learning difficulties in regular school programmes. Amongst a similar list proposed by Hodgson et al., (1984), includes references to: the numbers of children involved; adjustments to the physical environment; collaboration with other professionals; a gradual process of access and integration to appropriate practices and programmes.

Thus, such proposals and advice point to the need for flexible teaching and management approaches involving pre-school children. However, the attitudes of some professionals to the

educational and management needs of some children who present difficulties, as the author's study has exposed, need sensitive attention by all who are anxious about maximising the potential of all our children.

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