Big Problems for Small Children

Spring 1980

$1.00

13

RADICAL EDUCATION DOSSIER

Contents

October, 1980

RED 13 has been compiled and produced by Randall Albury, Clift Barnard, Chris Baxter, John Freeland, Ken Johnston, Jenny Kerr and Janet Kossy.

Radical Education Dossier is produced by a group of teachers, students and university staff working to bring about democratic and socially progressive change in Australian schooling, as part of a broad political movement toward a socialist revolution in Australia. The magazine aims to present a socialist analysis of a wide range of theoretical and practical issues in education and is not affiliated with any political party.

Typesetting: Propaganda, 660 0037
Cover art by Yvonne Pearsall for Matilda Graphics, 212 2558
Printing: Panacea Press — 211 1089
*Recommended and maximum retail price only.
ISSN 0314-6251

Big Problems for Small Children

How are primary schooling and early childcare faring under the current economic depression? Concern over youth unemployment and the school-work transition has focused our gaze on the later years of schooling and we have largely ignored the serious pressures and constraints affecting the early years. This issue of RED starts to correct this balance by examining the pressures on primary school children and teachers and those who seek and provide early child care.

The early 70s were years of innovation and optimism in primary education. Schools Commission funds flowed into the primary schools through the Disadvantaged Schools and Innovations programs. Teachers, and an increasing number of parents, worked together around the themes of open-education, child-centred learning, community involvement, multi-cultural education, school-based curriculum and shared decision making. Despite the rhetoric and the token nature of some of these initiatives, they did provide a space in which socialist and progressive teachers could work towards a more democratic, participatory structure of schooling. But where are we now? Vicki Carrier argues in her article that recent pressures on primary teachers have transformed this optimism into a malaise, and that without improved support services and staffing, the earlier reforms will remain insubstantial.

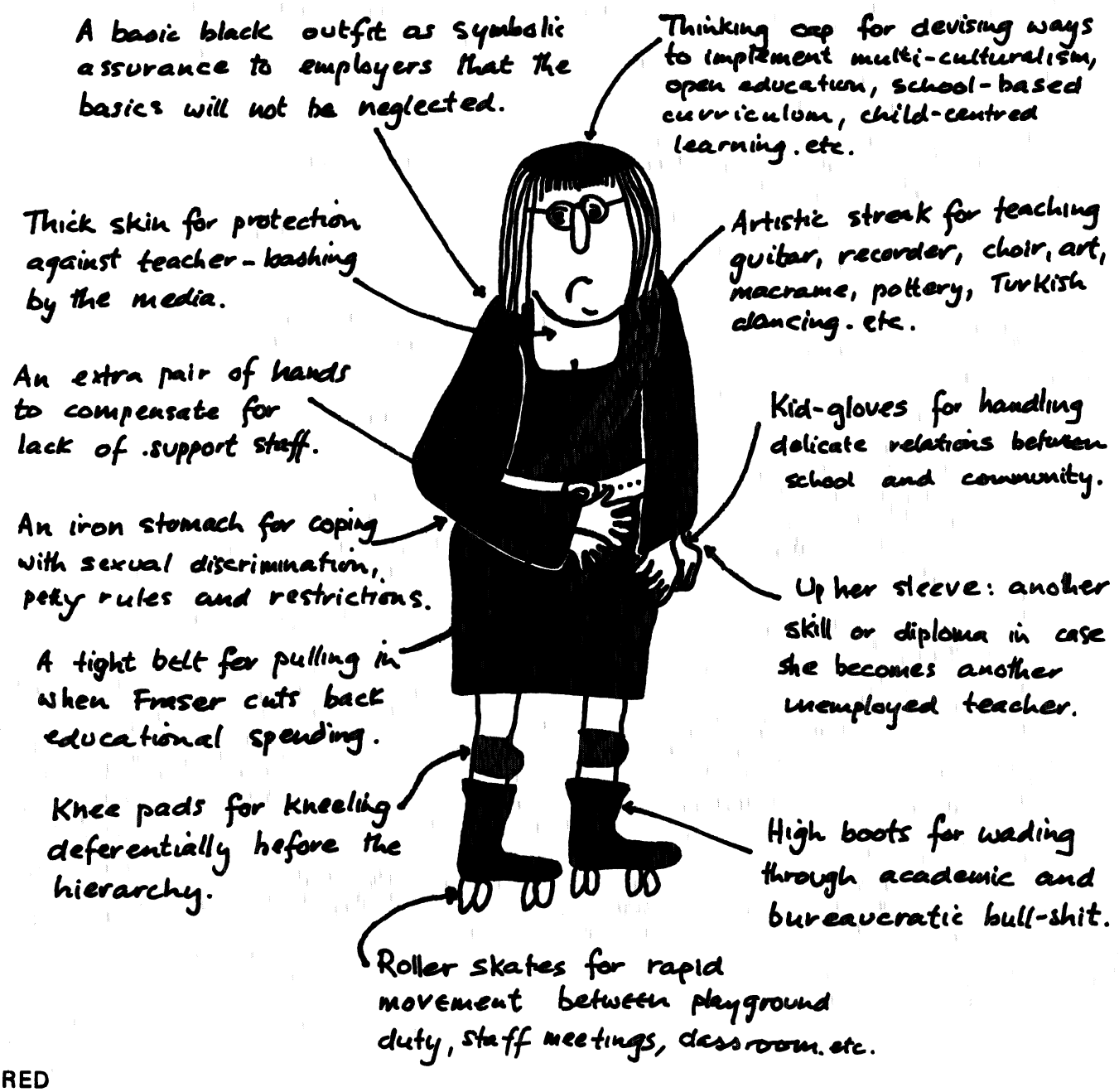
One important recent pressure on infant and primary teachers centres around reading. In the attack on schools over literacy, the media have focused parental anxiety around the issue of reading, and both teachers and parents are understandably confused as advocates of rival reading schemes counter each other's claims. In this issue of *RED* we present three articles which discuss this problem. Jean Law provides an overview of the main approaches to reading, their weaknesses and strengths. Is literacy simply a technical skill of deciphering words? Barbara Bee argues strongly that it is much more than this, and that the issue of meaningful content is of central importance in the political process of becoming literate. Perhaps the most recent reading scheme to push to the centre of the stage is the DISTAR program, based on the Direct Instruction method. This American, behaviourist scheme has attracted fervent support, and strong criticism, and is the subject of Christine Nichol's article in this issue.

In the area of child care we have also seen a retreat from the reformist policies of the early 1970s. Our position here is quite clear. In the interests of equality for women to enter the workforce, and the best possible provision for the care of children, it is essential to regain the momentum and demand substantial increases in funding for adequate child care provisions. RED believes that child care must become a key political and educational issue and we publish here an important article by Deborah Brennan, Lynne Davis and Margot Simpson which reviews the recent history and politics of child care in Australia. We hope that our readers will respond to their analysis; we would welcome further articles on this theme.

PRIMARY EDUCATION - THE CURRENT MALAISE

Vicki Carrier

PRIMARY TEACHING: A JOB DESCRIPTION FOR THE 1980's



The NSW Department chose 'A new century of learning' as the theme for its Centenary Education Week this year, boldly heralding a future in which education plays a vital role. Brave words, noble sentiments. And yet, education both in New South Wales and federally, is at a low ebb. The 'golden age of Karmel', those heady days of the early 70s when teachers were encouraged to experiment, to innovate, and to come to terms with the problems of schooling at a grass roots level, are all but gone. While Schools Commission funding continues, monies for Innovations and Disadvantaged Schools Programs initiatives have been seriously eroded. More than that, the climate has changed. 'Radical' is a rude word, 'innovation' is seen as a mistaken step encouraged by misguided idealists, and there is abroad a strongly conservative push to 'go back to the basics'. In many schools teacher morale is low, and parents and teachers have themselves frequently become strong advocates for a conservative approach to education.

This is particularly the case in primary education. This article will attempt to analyse some of the factors contributing to the current malaise in primary education. The emphasis is on looking beyond the four walls of the classroom, or even the school, to institutional bureaucratic, economic and political constraints.

The Karmel era was one of optimism. It was also a time of economic boom. People felt secure, expansive and liberal ideas flourished. Our current economic recession has resulted in a conservative, most often reactionary swing of the pendulum. In a period of high unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, education has become a most convenient scapegoat. As fewer and fewer jobs are available for today's school leavers, competition for the credentials which will win those jobs has become fierce and the pressures on schools to 'deliver the goods' have reached down through the secondary system to primary schools. Many individual teachers, or whole school staffs, have withstood the pressures, have held firm to their beliefs and continued to examine their practice. Others have not fared so well.

In this article a number of the pressures upon primary teachers in the 80s are explored, and some tentative suggestions made as to the way forward.

THE PRESSURES ON PRIMARY TEACHERS

Curriculum Changes

There have been considerable changes in the primary curriculum over the last five to ten years. Teachers previously were used to being told in curriculum statements exactly what to teach and when to teach it. Best-selling textbooks, often referred to as the 'defacto' curriculum, further eroded the creativity and professional power of teachers by telling them **how** to teach. During the 1970s the boundaries of legitimate knowledge became increasingly uncertain. In New South Wales for instance, new curriculum statements in language, arts and social science, issued in the early 70s, were essentially statements of intent. They informed primary teachers about what they should generally be striving towards, and why, but left to them the details of how and when. Some teachers found the new freedom very much to their liking, and there are many classrooms in which these new curriculum statements have resulted in more meaningful learning programs, related to the particular needs of a changing society.

Many other teachers have not fared so well. Some floundered with the new ideas for a while, then reverted to what they knew best – the tried and true textbooks and methods of the sixties. This means that in a significant number of classrooms in the 1980s, children are being presented with curriculum content and teaching strategies hopelessly outdated.

Another group of teachers sought help in the new-brand teacher textbooks and resource kits with which publishers flooded the school library market. Few of these packaged ideas have seriously examined topics which impinge on political issues or questions of essential human values, and when they have, they have been savagely attacked, as, for example, in Queensland where *Man: A Course Of Study* was banned.

For most children, therefore, primary school is a time for dealing with 'fun' topics such as witches, dragons, autumn or at the park. These same children may be confronted with stark TV news film of Kampuchean refugees starving to death, or are regularly exposed to the deceptive but attractive commercials which have already formed Kids' Kulture – telling them what to wear, what junk foods to consume, and what games to play. Surely they deserve in their primary years, the right to question and expose some of the issues that already affect their lives. A diet of friendly dragons and Australian wildflowers is not enough – neglecting the less comfortable, more politically sensitive issues is to sell a whole generation of children short.

There are two different types of solution to the dilemmas described here. The first lies in the provision by State departments of much more adequate support services to teachers. When the New South Wales new primary language curriculum statement was issued in 1974, teachers were expected to understand for themselves the philosophy and teaching implications of the document, and to implement its recommendations with an occasional day of in-service assistance or a rare visit from a very busy consultant.

Teachers' reactions to this lack of systematic support were various; most grumbled in staff room huddles, then kept trying in their individual classrooms. As mentioned previously, some turned their backs on the new curriculum, while others invested enormous amounts of time and energy in reaching their own understanding of it. Very few of us saw it as our **right** to have support services: we did not argue for them; demand them. We did not choose any form of concerted, collective action to demand our rights, all to the detriment of the kids we struggled to teach.

The second solution lies in a recognition that education is by nature political. This fact of life is carefully avoided by most primary teachers. A 'Christopher Robin' picture of childhood is comforting, but not realistic. It also undervalues the intelligence and insight of children. A rigorous examination of the nature of society and its values, with continuous debate between staff members, is one way in which the trivialisation of primary education may be overcome. Entrenched attitudes are not easily changed, and the first steps may be the most difficult: those of consciousness raising.

Where attempts in this direction have been made, they tend to arise from various pressure groups within society, demanding that the school system deal with areas of education previously either totally ignored or alternatively seen as the province of the family. Media studies, personal development programs, environmental education, non-sexist education, are just a few of the important social education areas competing for the teachers' attention. Inadequately prepared to confront most of these issues, and with no support from an unsympathetic system, it is understandable that teachers turn their backs on the unknown, and cling to the familiar areas of the 3 Rs. The conflict is further heightened by force of the 'back to basics' media campaign.

Primary Teachers and the Teaching of Reading

The attack on schools over standards has hit primary teachers hard. A government and employer attack has been taken up by the media with a vengeance. Parents, anxious for their children's future in a time of economic insecurity, have added their voices to the cry. A direct instruction approach to reading has been heavily promoted in the press, and many schools have seen the 'reading scheme' as the answer to their own doubts and those of parents: it is something certain in a sea of uncertainties. It is worth remembering that the educational publishing trade is a multi-million dollar business, and that most Australian reading schemes are adaptations of American schemes, owned by multinational companies (eg SRA is a subsidiary of IBM). It is not the purpose of this article to enter into a lengthy appraisal of reading schemes (done elsewhere in this issue), however, it should be noted that many of them are based on a very limited, mechanical view of the reading process. Children exposed to such schemes over a long period of time learn a great deal more about passivity and conformity than about the enjoyment that reading can afford. They learn nothing about the powers of the literate in our society. Recent research on how children become fluent readers has indicated that many children come to their first year of formal schooling already fluent and enthusiastic readers. These children have all had frequent opportunities from an early age to share topics in a close, loving one-to-one relationship with an adult. They did not learn their love and enjoyment of literature from a careful, step by step graded analysis of reading skills.

Why have not these findings been applied to the school system? Why should not all kindergarten and infants' grades classes be limited to a class size of ten to twelve children? In such classes, all children could be introduced to reading as a pleasurable and meaningful activity. The amount of individualised attention available for each child should ensure a much higher reading rate than is currently the case.

The most obvious criticism of such a program is that it is teacher-intensive and therefore expensive. A short-sighted view, in terms of the benefits to be accrued from a more literate society in the twenty-first century. Again it is a political issue: if the politicians were serious about standards they would provide for teacher-intensive early childhood education. It may well not be as profitable for the corporations pushing prepackaged reading schemes.

Pressures From Parents

Many teachers blame the current mentality of schools upon parental criticism of modern teaching approaches. An analysis of why parents are sometimes unsympathetic to schools should look first perhaps at what experiences helped form the conservative attitudes many hold. In most cases parents' own memories of school are the only yardstick they have against which to measure what they believe to be going on in schools today. Children, when asked 'What did you do at school today?' are quite likely to dismiss the question with 'Nothing much'. Parents whose contact with the school is very fleeting, when the they see children talking in groups or playing with maths games, are apt to make comparisons with their own schooling. The differences in teaching style are reinforced by the barrage of attacks on teachers they encounter in the popular press, often forcefully argued and almost always convincing. It is not surprising, therefore, that parents are suspicious of curriculum changes nobody has bothered to explain to them, especially when they are constantly worried that standards are falling. After all, it is the future of their child that is at stake.

Teachers do not have the power to rebuff the daily education-bashing stories appearing in the press. However, they do have first-hand, truthful information about the worth of what they are attempting and achieving. Schools where parents feel they are regularly consulted about curriculum changes, new methods and materials often count the parents as their allies. Recent in-service courses aimed at 'demystifying' the modern primary curriculum for parents have been successful both in terms of the numbers of parents they attract, and in terms of their outcomes. Some schools have conducted their own school-based programs, either inviting parents to come in school time and work alongside the children on a particular task, or alternatively designing evening programs whereby parents can gain first-hand experience of the enjoyment and difficulties encountered by their children in school. *Radical Education Dossier 12* contains examples of many worthwhile attempts to inform parents about their children's schooling. The next step, of course, is to involve parents in the decision-making process about what should constitute the school curriculum.

THE DEMISE OF OPEN EDUCATION

'Open Education' is a disturbing example of tokenism in our schools. During the middle 70s it was 'awfully innovative' to 'open up a classroom or two'. In a climate of innovation, schools were quick to seize upon a new, stimulating idea. Walls were knocked down, carpets laid, furniture redistributed. The hectic activity was well-meaning, but often not accompanied by a deep understanding of the aims or underlying assumptions of open education. In fact, open education is a radical challenge to many long-cherished beliefs about the nature of school learning, but without a thorough going critical restructuring of all the inter-related aspects of the schooling process, can easily become a 'post-revolutionary' solution in a 'pre-revolutionary' system. It assumes that children are capable of resourcefulness, self-discipline and creativity, and that they are inquisitive: they do want to learn. It assumes that teachers do not have all the answers, that they trust and respect children, and that there is not one fixed body of knowledge whose transmission is vital to society's preservation. Open education encourages relationships between teacher and children which directly oppose the notions of 'pupil control' which still predominate in primary education. Many teachers who were encouraged to 'open up', were improperly prepared for doing so. For them 'open education' sounded good and was worth a try. But with no real understanding and ideological commitment to the concept, and therefore no real understanding of the changes it implied to basic classroom structures they had always taken for granted, they were at first surprised and then disappointed when the children in their open classrooms seemed to experience difficulties adjusting to new routines. In some schools the 'open classroom' experiment lasted only a couple of months: 'We tried open

education last term, but it didn't work'. Quotes like this are an indication of a basic lack of understanding, which often leads to bandwagoning. There are a select number of state schools where open education has become a reality for many years. In those schools staff have been prepared to experiment, made mistakes, accept failure, and to go on exploring their ideas through reading and discussion. They truly understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, and so are able to justify their practice in the face of ill-informed criticism.

Nevertheless, open education has in the 1980s, generally, been dumped by schools and by the public. Certainly the current conservative swing has not helped, but it is worth speculating whether such a radical concept of education would have become more deeply accepted had government taken it seriously in terms of financial and moral support. It is with some bitterness that many teachers view other educational innovations nominally taken up by the NSW Department of Education, but not supported in terms of support services. Will school-based curriculum development, a major step forward with strong implications for staff and community powers for decision-making be any different? Unless support is forthcoming, it too will take its place on the scrap heap of educational ideas.

LOW TEACHER MORALE AND TEACHER CONFORMITY

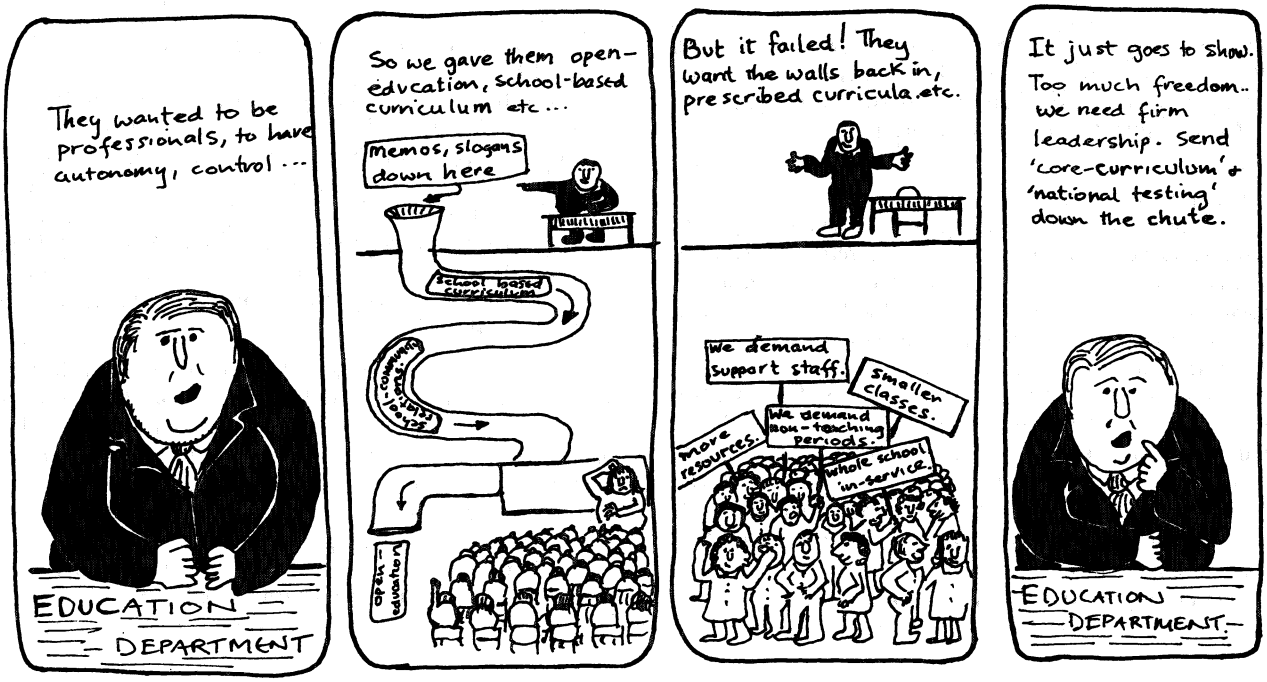
Mention has been already made of the 'siege mentality' of many teachers today. Education is under constant attack from without, and government or departmental spokespersons are remarkable for their reticence: when was the last time you heard an 'official' publicly defend teachers?

Primary teaching is a demanding job – the face to face contact with young children six hours a day is for most teachers emotionally wearing. In the past, in a freer job market, teachers could freely enter and leave the teaching service without many hassles. Today, teachers who resign from the NSW State Department wait in queue for three years before they can expect an offer of a job. Once teachers who decided that the classroom was really not the appropriate career for them were confident that they could find work in other areas where some of their skills were transferable: this is no longer the case. Consequently, the teacher resignation rate is at its lowest ebb for years, and this low figure hides a proportion of unhappy teachers who would rather not teach. If the low resignation rate is maintained, then the future also holds the prospect of an ageing, less dynamic teaching service.

Some teachers are clearly intimidated by the current conservative climate of educational thinking. Given different circumstances, they would be prepared to experiment with progressive ideas, but still unsure of themselves, and perhaps their commitment, they will not initiate change. They need the supportive environment which encourages ideas and accepts mistakes. Without it, their ideas will turn sour and they will lose the sparks from which the ideas grow.

Young teachers in their teacher preparation courses and then in the years of searching for and finding a teaching job, are most vulnerable to the pressures to conform. They have little with which to bargain in a fiercely competitive job market. In order to get themselves casual jobs during the waiting years they learn and adopt the conservative behaviours which make them most acceptable to bosses. Only time will show whether they have adopted these conservative attitudes temporarily, or thoroughly internalised them. If the latter is the case, the future of progressive ideas and change is not a bright one.

Pressures to conform to the status quo are also exerted upon those experienced teachers who seek promotion. With falling student numbers, and with the teaching service retaining teachers longer, promotion prospects are fairly limited. For those seeking promotion in such a climate, there often seems little choice but to adopt at least temporarily the prevailing conservative approach. Many radical teachers have chosen to reject the promotion system totally, rather than risk exposing themselves to these conformist pressures. While such decisions may be made on sound ideological grounds, there is an element of opting out in this stance. If all those with progressive ideas reject the promotion path, by default the way is left open for more conservative teachers to dominate in all positions of power in the State system.



SO WHAT TO DO ?

The picture painted here is not a bright one. On the one hand primary teachers have been presented with an almost overwhelming array of new ideas and approaches to teaching and learning. Many of the ideas have been officially embodied in curriculum statements. In other words, on paper, education is progressing. But on the other hand, we have a teaching force by nature conservative, and operating under considerable pressures. There are the pressures generated by an inadequate understanding of some of the more child-centred ideas and their implications for the classroom; there are the pressures felt from a hostile employer, Federal Government and media campaign; there are the pressures from an anxious, distrusted and often misinformed body of parents. There are the internal pressures of working within an unwieldy bureaucracy with little sympathy for workers or their problems. There are the pressures of teacher unemployment and the promotion bottleneck.

One solution would be to give up, to just let things take their course. Some have chosen that solution already, by blaming the System and confining their activities to their own classrooms. They bury their heads in the sand, but the problems still remain.

Another solution would be to chip away individually at those problems to which we believe we have a solution. Such action is commendable, but in the long term not very effective – one teacher's coming to grips with curriculum change, or establishing better communication links with parents, may easily be swamped by the larger, system-wide problems. The best solution is, of course, collective action. The collective action of a united staff has in the past benefitted children in many schools: differential staffing and smaller class sizes in disadvantaged schools resulted from moves initially made by determined and dedicated school staffs. Collective action by larger groups of teachers, at Federation level, has resulted in better conditions for children and teachers.

Collective action for what? Some of the answers to the problems outlined here are relatively simple. Most are to some extent economic. Here are a few of the improvements for which we primary teachers might collectively campaign.

1 **Improved Support Services**

More assistance in understanding and implementing new curricula is needed. Not isolated days of in-service education, attended by one member of staff only, but a period of intensive support from a team of consultants, for the whole school staff. This means finding the money to release a whole school staff from normal teaching duties, while they together grapple with the complexities of school-based curriculum development. This has been done in Queensland. Where individual teachers express a need to update their knowledge in a particular curriculum area, this should also be encouraged. 'Refresher courses' are funded in many professions and industry, so why not in education? A realistic budget for primary teachers' 'in-service' needs is crucial if recent 'paper' curriculum changes are to become classroom reality.

2 **Improved Staffing**

It is impossible for school staffs to find adequate time for planning, reflection, evaluation, either individually or on a whole-school basis, and also work with children for the entire school day without a break. Adequate relief from face to face teaching for every classroom teacher is a necessity if recent curriculum statements are to be implemented effectively.

Perhaps the South Australian and ACT experiences provide us with a possible model. Similarly the employment of additional staff to assist primary teachers cope with 'specialist subjects such as music, PE, and art and craft, would allow teachers to pursue new curriculum ideas in greater depth.

Greatly reduced class sizes at the early childhood level could greatly enhance the learning and love of reading, as indicated earlier.

3 **Teacher-Developed Classroom Materials**

Teachers do need stimulating and relevant materials to effectively implement new language, social studies, number and reading programs. Too many existing materials we have access to are commercially-produced, expensive, and not appropriate to the needs of Australian children. Additionally, many are ideologically and pedagocially unsound. Teachers in the Sydney inner-city, through the Disadvantaged Schools Program and The Inner City Education Centre, have already shown that interesting and worthwhile materials can be produced by teams of teachers. For instance, through the ICEC, teachers have developed materials relevant to the multi-ethnic reality of inner-city kids (see *RED 9* and *11*). The cost is low in terms of materials, but high in terms of teacher time. The release of teachers to produce their own materials is crucial to the furthering of school-based curriculum initiatives.

4 **Improved Public Relations**

Government support for the work of teachers has been conspicuously absent over the past twleve months. Media teacher-bashing is often left unanswered. Some school staffs have countered the attacks at their local level, but it would seem that a more widespread approach is needed to inform the community about the realities of primary education in the 1980s.

Concerted efforts should be made to convince the Government of its responsibility in giving the public the facts that are too often ignored by the media. The 'Let's Develop Education' campaign being conducted by the Australian Teachers Federation and its affiliates, the national Parents and Citizens associations and by the Australian Union of Students provides a welcome initiative in this direction and should receive the collective support of teachers and parents at the local level.

The improvements suggested above are not 'pie in the sky'. They are the least we should expect if we are serious about improving educational quality and outcomes. They will never be handed to us on a plate, especially in the current economic climate. If we want recent progressive ideas to become the reality for kids, then we must be prepared to show we value these ideas – by examining closely our own classroom practice and its implications, but also by working together, in demanding the kind of support services that will enable us to do a better job.

LEARNING TO READ

The supposed failure of schools to teach the basic skills of literacy is a major theme in the current attacks on education. While it is important to analyse the economic and political motivation for these attacks, as we have done in past issues, the actual process of skills acquisition bears examination as well.

How *do* children learn to read? The following three articles attempt to answer that question. In the first article, which is likely to be particularly informative for readers who are not infants teachers, Jean Law describes and evaluates the various approaches of some widely used reading schemes. Next Barbara Bee discusses the political nature of literacy, and how it affects what goes on in classrooms. Finally, Christine Nicholls takes a critical look at Distar, the much publicised reading scheme to which many parents and teachers are turning for instant solutions to children's reading rpoblems.

RED invites further comment on the issues involved in teaching basic skills, and responses to these articles would be welcome.

TEACHING READING

An Evaluation of Current Approaches

Jean Law

Increasing criticism from academics and the community over literacy standards has exerted pressure on teachers within infants schools to see that they develop reading programs designed to ensure every child is able to read 'competently' by the time they reach primary school. Unfortunately, this pressure is often reinforced by unrealistic expectations of colleagues in the primary and secondary schools, teachers who, while well meaning in their concern for standards, fail to understand the complexities of the process involved. Again, unfortunately, this pressure has at times 'succeeded' in that it has led to the adoption by some schools of reading programs which do not meet the needs of the children they are supposed to help.

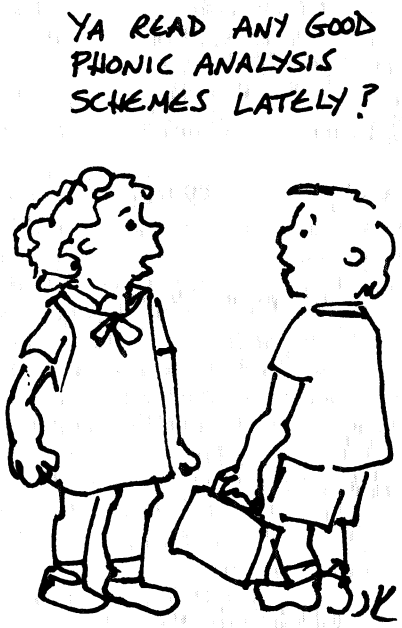
This article, therefore, attempts to outline the various approaches to the teaching of reading, and to evaluate them in terms of their real effectiveness – namely, teaching children to read fluently and with full comprehension. It is hoped that it will also establish a clear link between language and reading development, and the necessity to closely link these two processes.

Language Learning

There are three interrelated processes involved in the acquisition of language – the learning of oral, reading and writing skills. These three areas of language are, however, commonly treated independently of each other within the classroom. Spoken language skills are acquired readily by the vast majority of the world's population and for this majority this process invariably precedes the development of reading and writing, ie oral competence precedes literacy. This fact has enormous significance for the classroom teacher, for it implies two things. Firstly, and most obviously, children who do not have oral competence in English, ie children from non-English speaking backgrounds, cannot be expected to gain **real** reading skills in English at the same rate as other children. Secondly, and just as importantly, initial reading programs need to be based on the language used by the children if the process is to really facilitate the acquisition of literacy skills. We must remember that the average English speaking child has an extremely rich and diverse oral vocabulary[1] and structure[2]. Yet few reading schemes take account of this fact. In failing to make use of the resources already available to them and known to the child, they fly in the face of an accepted and well known educational principle: from the known proceed to the unknown.

It is the same for writing skills. All too frequently they are treated separately from the general language and/or reading program. As a result, children do not make the connection between these skills, and all too often fail to develop the richness in their written language, which is already there in their oral language.

What are the implications for the classroom teacher? We need to develop extensive and stimulating oral language programs,



particularly for those children from non-English speaking backgrounds, and for those who are 'language deprived'. Initial reading programs should be closely related to the language already used by the child, and to the oral language program. Writing skills should not be treated separately, but as an integral part of a language-reading program.

Approaches To The Teaching Of Reading

Of the many approaches to the teaching of reading, I will discuss the three methods most commonly used. They are:

1 Phonic Analysis,
2 Look-say (or Sight Word);
3 Experiential;

Another much trumpeted 'new method' – DISTAR, is dealt with at length elsewhere in this journal, and is not discussed here.

Phonic Analysis

This is a method extensively used in initial reading schemes. It depends on the child being able to give a correct sound value to a written symbol, and then to synthesise those sounds in a single, but, to the child, not necessarily meaningful utterance, eg 'c-a-t' or 'ca-t' or 'c-at' = cat.

This method relies heavily on a child having well developed auditory skills, and an ability to analyse word structures into sounds and then to synthesise sounds into whole meaningful sounds.

One of the problems of phonic analysis is that it is not in itself a method of decoding (ie gaining meaning), but of recoding from a graphic to an oral code[3]. Therefore, there is no assurance that the child will comprehend the meaning of the word he or she has worked out phonically. In addition, the process is lengthy and complex, and can result in the demoralisation of children when they attempt to read. This demoralisation is further intensified if the children have poor auditory skills, or if they rely more on visual skills.

This is not to say that there is no place for phonic analysis in initial reading schemes. Its value lies in the fact that it does give children skills with which they can tackle words new to them, and with which they can reinforce their knowledge of words already familiar to them. It is also immensely valuable in the teaching of spelling – a skill which is all too often overlooked.

However, it fails to meet the essential criteria of a good reading scheme. It does not rely on the knowledge of language that children already possess, it makes no attempt to link up the three areas of language skills, and its acquisition does not necessarily mean the acquisition of comprehension. From my experience, both as a classroom teacher in high density migrant schools and presently as an ESL teacher, I have frequently seen children who can readily 'read' a book – attacking new words with apparent ease – yet having little or no understanding of the words they were 'reading' so easily.

Look-Say (Or Sight Word)

In this method, children are taught to recognise individual words or, in some schemes, words and their modifiers or auxiliaries, eg 'am going' – 'a (the, this) dog'. A basic 'sight-word' vocabulary is thus built up, either based on words in the reading books the children are given, or in supplementary or thematic lists, eg the weather, the home, ways in which we move.

To teach the words, children are asked to 'look' at the printed form, either in a class or individually, and 'say' it. Often words being introduced are used in labelling activities around the room, eg 'the door', 'the window', etc, in the hope that familiarity with the written form of the word will help to develop recognition of it.

There are limitations in this approach. Children can only recognise words already taught to them, or words that are composites of words they know, eg chalk + board = chalkboard, cup + board = cupboard. (Note that meaning is not necessarily related to the ability to recode.)

The words selected need not be – and frequently are not – familiar to the children or related to any experience they have had. Therefore comprehension of meaning is often artificial, or non-existent. For example, what understanding will there be of the word 'snow', beyond a very superficial one, if the child 'learning' it has never experienced it, and because of language limitations cannot use other words (eg cold, flake, ice-like) to build up the necessary concept.

There is no consideration of the way in which content can change the meaning. For example 'fish' has no one meaning in itself, but rather depends on the context given it by other words. There are significant differences of meaning in all of the following:

I'm going to fish
The fish in the pond
Deep sea fish
I caught the 'Fish and Chips'
Don't fish for compliments.

Unless placed in the context, the word has little, or at best limited meaning.

Reliance On Phonic Analysis/Sight Word Reading Schemes

Most reading schemes used in schools rely on one or other, or a combination of the above methods. So it follows that they suffer the weaknesses outlined above.

One other limitation of most reading schemes is an artificial (for the child) development of language structure. There is an assumption made that the reading process is made easier when material is graded from simple to complex structures. This assumption – which does not follow the way in which oral language develops – combined with the repetition of language frequently results in boring, non-stimulating material, eg:

'Nip. Here, Nip. Here, Nip, here. Come Nip. Come Nip come. Come here, Nip.'

Ho-hum! Need anything more be said.

Often, neither the language nor the experiences round which the language is built have anything in common with the language used, or the experiences enjoyed, by the children being taught. It is little wonder that many children are not motivated into learning to read.

Experiential Reading Programs

These are based on the principle that children have less trauma learning to read if the written language used is the same as the oral language of the children and if the experiences round which the language is developed are their experiences. The teacher, and later the child, writes down in the child's own language the child's experiences. The material built up in this way forms the core of such a program with other books being used for extension and enrichment.

There are many advantages in this approach. A close, personal companionship between teacher and pupil necessarily develops with this method. (This need can also be a limitation.) Children seeing speech-in-print gain the understanding that written language is 'printed' oral language – an understanding which is not necessarily realised by children. Security in reading experiences results from a non-stress reading environment of this kind, and because the method is based on the child's own experiences, it results in less error making and thus less failure. Further, because it is based on the child's own language, it does not depend on the knowledge and application of word attack skills, nor does it require the child to use 'standard' English.

Of the various Experiential Reading Schemes, three are worth mentioning.

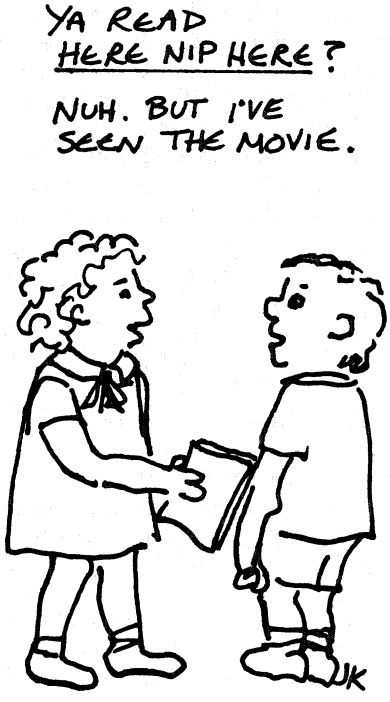
Breakthrough To Literacy

Developed in Britain, it is based on the collation of the most commonly used single word vocabulary of 5 year olds. Because it is a 'whole' reading scheme, it provides not only books, but children's and teacher words, folders and sentence makers. It is also one of the few schemes that develops reading through creative expression. Children use the words they have acquired in a basic sight vocabulary to construct sentences. These are then recorded in a book and this is the basic 'reader'. Printed books provide extension reading. Children are encouraged to experiment with language by varying word position and vocabulary, and because children add to their store of words according to their own ability, they progress according to individual needs. Reading, therefore, can commence before the child learns a complex phonic word attack.

However, this scheme is not without its drawbacks. Stress can be created by fear of not keeping 'up' – especially as folders are not distributed until a basic sight vocabulary of 12 words is obtained. New sets of vocabulary have to be made if teachers wish to move away from the base vocabulary to draw on children's own experiences in the home, school or community. The organisation of material can be a major problem, especially for the children. And finally, while context is recognised as being important for gaining meaning, there is a heavy reliance on the look-say method of individual word recognition.

Individual And/Or Class Programs

Here the program centres around the individual needs of the class or child. Language is developed from numerous sources – local and other excursions, home situations, common cultural experiences, special events in the school or community, school activities. I have already discussed the advantages of such an approach. There are disadvantages which need to be taken into consideration. A great deal of time is needed for the organisation of material, preparation, recording and compilation of children's books. Lack of coherence and continuity can occur if it is not a whole school method, and/or if the child moves away or enters school during the year. Evaluation of both the child's progress and of teacher effectiveness is made difficult, and undue stress may be placed on teachers, especially if they are inexperienced or unsure of how to develop a well-structured and not fragmented language program.



Mt Gravatt

This new scheme, developed in Australia, is both an experiential and reading-for-meaning scheme and in many respects is quite different to any other scheme available to schools.

Because it is a reading for meaning scheme, words are not treated in isolation, but within the context of other words. Further, the language used, both in structures and content, is drawn from an analysis of the language children use, and from a study of its development and structure. This fact alone is extremely significant. Most language used in initial reading schemes is language selected by adults, because it is believed to be the language children use **or** ought to use. The language selected for the Mt Gravatt scheme was determined by a 'field study' type project. Small microphones were attached to the children under study. The children selected were all from socio-economic backgrounds in Brisbane, and all the language used by them was recorded, and later analysed by computer. One, two, three and larger word sequences were isolated and grouped according to frequency of use and the age of the children. In this way, both content and structural patterns were determined. Interestingly, it became clear that children ready for their first school year were already using complex language structures, and this complexity increased with each age group studied.

Meaningful units of spoken language were classified in the first place into two basic categories – signalling units and content units. It was found that signalling (or structure) units occurred more frequently than content units. Basic language structure is seen in the scheme more or less as follows:

	Signalling unit	+	**content unit**	= **Meaningful statement**
eg	That's my	+	hat	= That's my hat
	That's	+	a hat	= That's a hat
	I like	+	ice cream	= I like ice cream
	I like to	+	dance	= I like to dance

There is a deeper analysis of language in later stages in the scheme, giving children experience with progressively more complex structures and wider content.

However, the initial analysis is significant because, in determining how language operated, it was realised that the signalling units were equivalent to 'automatic language', ie the users did not have to 'think' about them to comprehend meaning. Further, minor differences in signalling units 'signalled' subtle differences in meaning (contrast 'That's my' with 'That's'), differences which were, however, significant for the children.

By using the patterns and content of children's language, the scheme eliminates a process necessary in the phonic analysis and sight word approaches. Because the children already use the language key set in print, they have no need to work out meaning. Instead, they concentrate only on recognising the printed word. In other words, they do not need to **recode** graphic into oral code, but proceed directly into **decoding**. Much of the stress is removed from the reading process, and the ensuing frustration and failure also disappear. Because the language is relevant to the child, interest and motivation are maintained.

Additionally, right from the beginning the child is encouraged to experiment (creatively) with language patterns, and to **record** them in written language. (For children who do not have the necessary manual dexterity to write, printed sheets using the language developed in each unit are provided for cutting and pasting.)

The scheme incorporates all aspects of language – oral, spoken, printed or written in an integrated way. Further, the scheme is developed across the curriculum, thus fully integrating all subject areas. In this way, the concepts around which language is being developed are fully understood by the children. The children's listening experiences are not restricted to the core language, but are extended and enriched by additional stories so that the children become familiar with a variety of language patterns they do not yet use.

Because the program is so thoroughly integrated across the curriculum, it frees the teacher from excessive lesson and material preparation, programming and organisation. An extensive range of material is provided for both the teacher and the child. The problem of discontinuity is avoided because it is a developmental language program and, therefore, structural in its approach. Enrichment, flexibility and the incorporation of thoroughly planned word attack skills as a consolidating activity to re-enforce the child's competence with the written language are also important aspects of the scheme.

Success is also an inbuilt factor, because language is not presented in its printed form until oral competency in each specific area has been developed, and books are not presented until all lead-up activities are thoroughly treated. Therefore, the book should always be able to be read when it is presented to the child.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the Mt Gravatt scheme in this article, because it meets most of the requirements of a good reading scheme. Its analysis also points clearly to the processes needed if the problems of literacy are to be tackled. By inference, it also clearly illustrates many of the weaknesses of other schemes which do not integrate all aspects of language acquisition, which fail to use language and experiences relevant to the children being taught, and which create frustration and failure by making the process of acquiring reading and writing skills unnecessarily complex and too difficult for many normal children and for those with atypical language backgrounds.

Until educationists and the community come to terms with the complexities of these processes, and while they increase the pressures on the average classroom teacher, the problems facing our children will remain. It is time that we remembered that education is supposed to meet the needs of those being educated, not the needs of academics, employers, the government or whoever makes the decisions that sentence children to frustrating and demoralising 'educational' experiences.

References

1 Hay J and Wingo C (1968), *Reading With Phonics*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, p ix.
2 Hart N, Walker R, Grey B (1977), *The Language of Children: A Key To Literacy*, Sydney, Addison-Wesley, p 13.
3 Op cit, p 15.

READING WITH MEANING

The Politics of Literacy

Barbara Bee

> 'In the moment when a teacher sets aside the myth of Neutral Education, he sets aside as well the role of quiet, passive and subservient acolyte of nation, state and racial order. To the degree he elects to stay **within** the public education apparatus, to this degree he undertakes a role which is not 'innocent' but tactical in all respects. His function, from this moment on, is to assign connections, to demonstrate the fraudulence of empty options, to undermine the walls of anaesthetic self-protection, to take out low-watt issues and replace them by high-voltage questions, to generate the confidence for insurrectionary actions, to instigate the capability to build up lines of strong and lasting loyalties among like-minded souls – then, too, and at the proper time, to build the readiness for stark and vigorous acts of intervention in the face of pain.
>
> *Jonathan Kozol*[1]

The current debate concerning the supposed decline in literacy standards rests on two assumptions, both incorrect. The first is that literacy is a technique of reading and writing which, if practised sufficiently and the rules of useage learned, can be 'got', like a driver's licence, by a certain age, usually, it is assumed, after six years' compulsory schooling. This definition of literacy is inadequate. Literacy is not something which is gained once and for all in a static way, but it is a dynamic, ongoing process throughout our lives whereby we use speech, reading and writing to unravel our lives and make sense of the world. Thus, to be literate is not to have arrived at some specified end, like the Higher School Certificate, or to be able to understand and fill in governmental forms and documents; it is much more than this and implies critical consciousness and the ability to take control over our own lives. It isn't simply the ability to follow words across a page from left to right and from top to bottom, but to be literate means you can bring your knowledge and experience to bear on what passes before you. It also means to take a point of view, despite what most school texts would have us believe! Which brings me to the next mistaken assumption, namely, that literacy is a neutral, technical process which can be taught without reference to the specific historical, social and cultural context of the learner. Paulo Freire, who has written and spoken much about the politics of reading and writing has claimed that literacy in any given society serves one of two purposes: to preserve and maintain the received order of social relations – to domesticate people and impose a 'culture of silence' to mask reality; or to liberate people and make them conscious of their significance in the world and their right to fight against those who would oppress and silence them.

> '. . . acquiring literacy does not involve memorising sentences, words and syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and recreation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context.'[2]

Schools, the servant-institutions of the state, offer only state-licenced and sanctioned views of knowledge and curricula – much of it riddled with class, racist and sexist bias. The obvious example regarding literacy is in infant primers where there is ample evidence to show that boys, as portrayed, are strong and aggressive, while girls remain essentially passive observers. Glenys Lobban, who coded the content of a number of reading schemes for their sexist bias claims that the books in these schemes affect strongly the way young children learn their sex roles and identify with the stereotypes they read about. Arguing that school readers do far more than merely teach children reading skills she says:

> 'The content of a reading scheme and other books children read has psychological effect, it influences the way children view themselves and the world. Reading schemes are thought to be particularly influential in this respect. They are often the child's first formal introduction to the written word, and they appear within the classroom and hence within the context of authority, and most children are compelled to read them.'[4]

It takes a brave teacher to do what Sylvia Ashton-Warner did with her Maori children when she threw away the accepted reading scheme with its alien language and middle class concepts and used instead the lives and experiences of the children themselves to suggest the words and write the stories.

I want now to open up a more general discussion of the politics of literacy and the way it affects children's responses to reading and writing. There are those children who leave secondary schools barely literate (ie just about able to follow the words of a book across a page) as opposed to properly literate and able to assess the how and what they read in relation to their lives. The conservatives and reactionaries would like to blame teachers and progressive methods of teaching for the supposed decline in literacy and 'back to basics' has become an oft-heard catchcry – a slogan taken up all too readily by the media and certain ivory-tower academics. The problem of poor

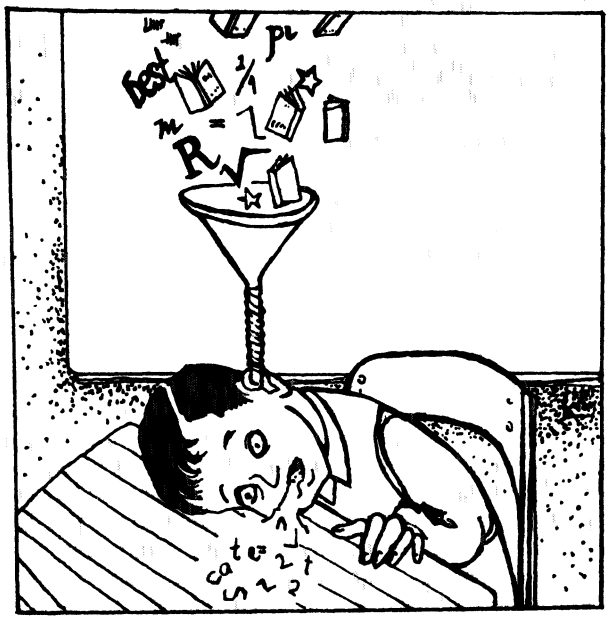
reading is not basically one of poor teaching I suspect, but rather the failure of most school reading materials to have relevance for the lives of the children. They lack context and coherence (and here again the questions of class, sex and race are crucial factors). Instead of leaning heavily on the lives, experiences, social and cultural backgrounds of the children themselves in the effort to motivate and instil confidence and ease with the printed word, teachers tend to rely on scientific models of reading which often imply expensively packaged schemes promising spectacular results because they are based on years of academic research. It takes a brave teacher to do what Sylvia Ashton-Warner did with her Maori children when she threw away the accepted reading scheme with its alien language and middle class concepts and used instead the lives and experiences of the children themselves to suggest the words and write the stories.

It needs courage and trust not to race into a set reading program the minute five year olds walk through the classroom door, but to wait, look and listen to what they talk about, how they talk and why, to note the context and make this the basis of the first printed words and sentences. Reading books for beginners ought, from the start, to reflect and challenge the real lives the children lead and not some artificially controlled world within the classroom. It's not surprising if some children, particularly those who do not live in the mainstream cultured world of the bourgeoisie, decide good and early that reading is simply not where-it's-at!

The Word As A Weapon And Tool

Teachers have to watch out for their own class bias too. Many teachers come from working class homes and have entered the ranks of the privileged by virtue of their profession. Many do not live in the same street and neighbourhoods as the children they teach and they go home at the end of the day to more affluent and pleasant surroundings than many of their children inhabit. Their values are mainstream ones and they may view these as the only desirable ones to promote in their classes too. Chris Searle, a committed socialist teacher in England (now teaching in Mozambique), has written some fine books showing how literacy can be used to forge in working class kids a strong identification with the ideals of justice and humanity. Searle's children came from the poor inner-city areas of London, from neighbourhoods torn apart by poverty and racial violence. He deliberately set out to use English as the battleground for testing out the children's ideas and ideals about the issues central to their lives and the lives of their parents. The themes that were chosen for the children to talk, read and write about were not taken from an antiseptic pre-packaged language kit, or thematic self-expression books, but were indicative of life itself – racism, unemployment, the closure of the local hospital, strikes, the fascist coup in Chile, the black miners' strike in South Africa, and the social and political history of the local neighbourhood. It's a far cry from Hamlet and Jane Eyre, but when you read with what passion, conviction and empathy these working class kids express themselves in Searle's book, it quickly becomes clear that literacy for them meant understanding their own social context and was the first step in learning how to act to change it, as Searle himself says:

'It attempts to show that some knowledge has a priority for assimilation: the knowledge of resistance to, and organisation against exploitation and subjection, and contact and empathy with the oppressed of the world, whether in your own street or lands or oceans away. . . . Within that view the priority was that these working class children should learn to read, write, spell, punctuate, to develop the word as a weapon and tool in the inevitable struggles for improvement and liberation for them, and the rest of their class all over the world.[5]



Kree Arvanitas

Given the climate of New South Wales schools I doubt if many of us would last long in our classrooms if we were as blatant as Searle in his uncompromising commitment to certain ideals. Nevertheless, I think there are ways in which we can aim quite deliberately to dispel the myth of the apolitical nature of literacy and in so doing make children aware of the power of words over our lives both in giving them meaning and direction.

To begin with I think we have to be wary of ever more technically efficient language and reading schemes for getting kids to read and write, but which are bland and unauthentic in their content. We have to keep our attention firmly fixed on the children themselves and our own contact and empathy with the lives they lead. Next, I think we have to be wary of schemes which are specially designed for the 'culturally deprived' and the 'socially disadvantaged', ie those programs which offer us a social pathology model of working class kids' speech, concept development, and ways of learning. I'm not suggesting for one moment that some children do not need extra or remedial help in their reading and writing, but what I am questioning is this whole notion of bringing the children of the poor up to a level commensurate with their middle class counterparts – whose social and cultural habits schools approve and maintain for obvious reasons. Untold damage is done to the self-respect and ego-identity of children who are taught in schools that there are 'better' or 'nicer' ways to speak than the forms with which they feel most at ease and comfortable[6]. Teachers must learn the difference between educational practice resting upon a social pathology model of one class, and a pathology model of the whole class system, which alienates everyone.

'. . . we have become trapped between notions of high culture on the one hand and shallow dwelling on personal feelings and impressions on the other, . . .'

The Social Context Of Children's Lives

Harold Rosen makes a powerful plan for teachers to recognise and tap the resources of working class lives and experience of ordinary men and women in helping children to learn to read and write. He is critical of the present emphasis in English teaching on self-expression and creativity which, like Kozol, he believes to lead to pallid inconsequential writing. He maintains that somewhere along the way in our teaching of literacy and literature we have become trapped between notions of high culture on the one hand and shallow dwelling on personal feelings and impressions on the other, neither of which is sufficient preparation for the world beyond school. He speaks of the dilemma of teachers who know that many of their children are destined for monotonous and boring jobs and yet whose whole emphasis in English has been designed to foster personal sensitivity, self exploration and individual awareness 'so frail it will melt in the heat of the production line'. He goes on:

> 'Perhaps in the necessary emphasis we have given to personal growth, language for personal development and literature as an intensely personal exploration we have made English sound like the greatest ego-trip ever invented.[7]

The social context of the lives of the children we teach is all we have and all we need he argues in enabling us to decide in what our English teaching shall consist of if, on the one hand, we want to be relevant and if, on the other, we want to avoid 'mass' culture. Arguing that for too long teachers have avoided engaging with the working class life in favour of polite and private experience, he maintains that teachers must now openly side with the social consciousness of their kids. They must, he writes,

> '. . . choose between descriptions of an impoverished restricted code and the unearthing of a living oral tradition, between visions of school as a civilised and well-ordered island in a sea of barbarism and anomaly and the aspiration that they should be reincarnated through the nourishment of the neighbourhood and community, between reading 'schemes' and literacy through critical consciousness. Indeed all the choices we make, minute, urgent, even trivial, are more and more seen as taking sides. English teaching has become an overtly political matter.'[8]

For teachers and educators the politics of literacy means continuing the battle against exploitation and oppression in all its forms through a critical analysis of language and literature. It means raising the level of our own consciousness so that we do not join the ranks of those who oppress children because their culture and race means they do not respond to mainstream indoctrinations and preferences. The time has long since past when reading was merely an isolated, individualistic pastime, used to escape from and rise above the pain and oppression of the real world.

Some time ago I read Jonathan Kozol's *The Night Is Dark And I Am Far From Home*. It shows the result of his having spent time with Paulo Freire. Kozol's main contention is that public schooling in the USA teaches children myths and lies. It teaches history, language and literacy in such ways that guarantee 'ethical antisepsis' and 'political decontamination'. It denies children the right of passionate commitment to an idea and ideal, teaches them to concede the right to dissent and oppose and virtually guarantees that both children, teachers and educators do not make strong, risk-taking choices in their lives. And all this finally because schools and education in America exist to preserve the economic inheritance and privilege of the ruling class. Words have become divorced from actions and therefore meaningless. His analysis doesn't seem too far removed from the situation which exists in many of our schools here. It's a position we have to challenge in our literacy and literature teaching for it creates and perpetuates the myth of equality. 'Politics is your concern: mine is the education of young children . . . I chose to lead a stable, rational existence. I do not choose to deal with politics, racism and class exploitation', was the comment made by a teacher to Kozol.

Committed socialist teachers, I suggest, have no such choice.

References

1 Kozol Jonathan (1975), *The Night Is Dark And I Am Far From Home*, Bantam Books.

2 Freire Paulo (1974), *Education: The Practice Of Freedom*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-op, London.
Freire is not easy to read, or so people suggest. I tend to agree, but I think his *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* and *Cultural Action For Freedom* well worth the effort. Two smaller publications dealing with Freire's work in particular and literacy teaching in general which are simple and instructive are Carol and Lars Berggrens' *The Literacy Process, A Practice In Domestication Or Liberation*, and Cynthia Brown's *Literacy In 30 Hours Paulo Freire's Process In North East Brazil*. Both are published by Writers and Readers.

3 O'Flinn Paul (1975), *Them And Us In Literature*, Pluto Press, London.
O'Flinn claims that he has tried to write a Marxist interpretation of literature that is both accessible and not boring. I think he has succeeded, although it will make the purists shudder.

4 Lobban Glenys (1975), 'Sexist Bias In Reading Schemes', in Martin Hoyles (ed) *The Politics of Literacy*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, London.

5 Searle Chris (1975), *Classrooms Of Resistance*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, London.
In addition Searle has written *This New Season, Stepney Words* and *The World In The Classroom* (and others I haven't yet read). This last is about strategies to help make children conscious of racial oppression and how to fight it in schools and neighbourhoods. It involves team teaching approaches and is *full* of ideas and resource materials which would, in some cases, need to be adapted to the Australian context.

6 See William Labov's essay, 'The Logic Of Non-standard English' in Nell Keddie (ed), *Tinker Tailor And The Myth Of Cultural Deprivation*, Penguin Education, 1973.
See also Herbert Ginsburg's *The Myth Of The Deprived Child*, Prentice-Hall Inc, Englewood Cliffs New Jersey, 1972 for an excellent treatment of poor children's intellect and education and how schools deny opportunities to these kids.

7 Rosen Harold, 'Out There Or Where The Masons Went', in Martin Hoyles *The Politics of Literacy, op cit.*

8 *Ibid.*

Pipi Storm Circus was formed in 1975 when six self-taught performers came together to share their talents in juggling, stilt-walking and folk dancing. They worked collectively and did their own administration, but their concern was, and still is, with the children as much as the performance. They aim to present a performance on the kids' level in every way – no raised stage is used, so that the experience of live music is within an arm's reach of the children, with all its excitement and richness. The show is presented in three-quarter-round and kids' involvement is an integral part of it, with music and humour aimed at what children enjoy. Teachers constantly comment that few other performances hold the children's attention for seventy minutes and generate such a high degree of involvement and excitement. Pipi Storm has the attitude that all the professionalism usually associated with adult shows should be present in school performances and that school shows should not be second-rate productions but full, exciting, vibrant musical presentations.

In 1979 the Pipi Storm company expanded to twenty performers and parks program workers, as well as a secretary/coordinator. This year it is presenting two performing groups in schools. One group of seven offers 'Kids' Kabaret Goes to Rio', showing the adventures of the seven on the road. All the music and songs are written by the group, and the performance is created collectively. Guest artistic and musical directors are brought in for the last weeks of rehearsal.

During third term, a group of four are presenting the 'Silicon Chip Slippery Dip Show', exploring the issues of technology and unemployment, which are especially relevant to high school students who are considering their prospects for employment. The show examines the cyclical nature of capitalist economies and challenges attitudes of self-blame evident in many students, the dole-bludger myth and the blame that is laid on the seven to twenty per cent who are unemployed.

Pipi Storm's other high school productions also follow this method of gearing the show to issues relevant to kids' lives. In 1979 the media and interpersonal relationships were explored in 'Media Mania' and 'True Luv' shows. A great deal of research goes into these high school productions – talking to kids, reading, seeing video tapes and films etc, with the idea of creating performances that entertain yet challenge and expand kids' view of the world.

A remarkable combination of circus skills, live musi group brings its original productions into New South W

Workshops

Workshops have always been an essential follow-up to all Pipi Storm performances. The group does not believe in the 'show and go' approach, but prefers to spend a whole day in the school. The primary workshops are in two sections: in the first, fifth and sixth class children attend a discussion led by the performers. Instruments are introduced and demonstrated. Most children are mystified by electrical instruments and are given an understanding of how the equipment works and how a rook band is put together. In a similar way, drama is discussed – how the show was written and rehearsed, costume, makeup, sound effects – and the children are given the opportunity to ask questions. In the second session, sixth class children are split into small groups for workshops led by members of the company focusing on a variety of skills. These workshops last an hour and a half, giving time to explore activities in a relaxed, pressure-free atmosphere.

Pipi Storm's workshops are a product of years of experience and a commitment to sharing skills and encouraging children to try and succeed in new activities. Each member of the group takes a workshop in their own interest area. Workshop groups are selected randomly from the group of children, with no discrimination between boys and girls.

ıd children's involvement, this unique community arts s schools, parks and festivals.

The Parks Program is a group of seven people who visit Sydney's suburban parks on weekends and holidays bringing a variety of circus skills, 'New Games', music and craft activities which are presented free of charge to the children. The atmosphere created in a park is one of excitement and a relaxed flow of children from one activity to another. The park becomes a focal point for the local parents and teenagers, who become involved in activities with the younger children. In 1980 the Parks Program is returning to the same park four weekends in a row so that activities can be extended and a relationship developed between all concerned. Deprived areas are concentrated on so that the greatest areas of need are serviced.

The activities of the Parks Program fall into three main categories:

1 Energetic physical fun (waterslide, earth ball and parachute games, other new games and flying the giant playsail);
2 Skill development (juggling, stilt-walking, tightrope walking, balancing on volla bollas, walking on geetahs and magic tricks);
3 Creative self-expression (face painting, mural painting, puppet and hat making, construction and playing of simple musical instruments, kite making).

Organisation

The organisation of the group this year is different from previous years, with more decision-making autonomy being given to the working groups (the two performing groups and the Parks Program). Grants for funding are usually applied for separately, and matters of wages, policy, length of program, etc, are decided by each group. Collective meetings of all strands are held regularly for intergroup communication, Pipi Storm policy, collaboration, office running and discussion of future projects.

The changes in organisation made in 1980 were decided by the group as a whole due to lessons learnt from 1979. There seem to be very few groups which operate in such an unhierarchical manner, and the course has been rough at times, as collective organisation demands a great deal of personal resources, which are needed to evolve systems of operation that are non-hierarchical and where skills and knowledge are shared by all workers.

The Crunch

Here is the crunch. Pipi Storm, like all community arts groups, is dependent on funding. In 1979 the company received half the budget it estimated as necessary, and collectively decided to receive very low wages to keep programs operating throughout the year. The situation is grimmer this year. Funding has been received from the Australia Council, Department of Cultural Activities and the Disadvantaged Country Area Program. However, this time underfunding has cut entire programs. The Parks Program will only work six months unless more funding is made available, and schools appearances have been pruned. After all the years Pipi Storm has worked in the field it is still not able to pay the basic wage, have a permanent office or rehearsal space, pay holiday pay . . . the list goes on.

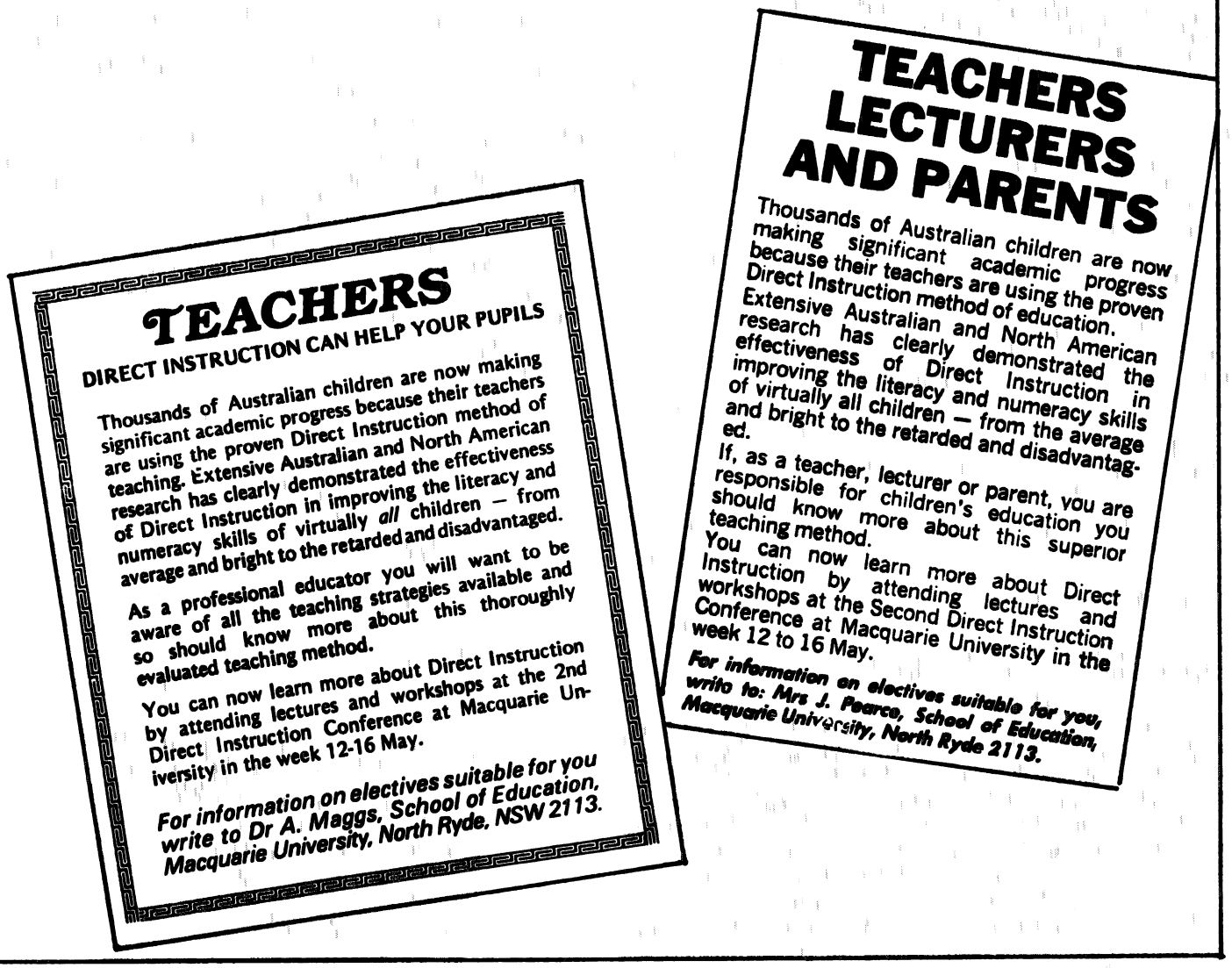
However, Pipi Storm remains true to its philosophy of whole-day school programs and free weekend activities, although much creative energy is constantly being channelled into funding, constantly applying for grants and writing reports. All this, of course, takes an enormous amount of time away from the work it could do with the children.

If you would like more information about the group, please contact Sue Storey on [02] 660 4250 or write to PO Box 60, Chippendale NSW 2008.

Direct Instruction

KENTUCKY FRIED READING SCHEME

Christine Nicholls



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Seen one of these ads recently? They refer, of course, to the recently much-vaunted material published by the American company SRA under the trade names of Distar, Corrective Reading, and Morphological Spelling.

Distar, which includes reading, language and arithmetic strands, is now being used in more than 450 New South Wales infants and primary schools. Sales are presently increasing at the rate of 70% per annum*. At average price of $190.00 per work box per fifteen pupils, plus consumable pupil workbooks which range from $1.50 to $4.50 each, these materials are no cheap proposition, especially when they are used across the board in a school.

Forbidden as they are to advertise directly under the trade names, it is nonetheless abundantly clear to most infants and primary teachers to which commercial materials these advertisements refer.

A small but growing number of people is becoming increasingly critical and concerned about the implications of the teaching methods advanced by Direct Instruction advocates, about the content of these so-called 'miracle' reading programs and about the powerful and effective advertising machinery promoting sales. Assisting SRA in the latter is the recently-formed Australasian Association for Direct Instruction which presently comprises over one hundred members.

The tenor of this Association is decidely evangelical. This year it has financed the trip to Australia of American co-creator of Distar, Wesley Becker. Professor Becker addressed the opening plenary session of the second week-long DI conference held at Macquarie University during the May holidays. More than one hundred people attended this seminar which was designed to train teachers and parents in the use of DI.

SRA assisted in this undertaking by printing the 100+ page booklets which were distributed to every person attending the conference. Last year SRA itself sponsored Becker's Australian tour.

The question arises of whether it is economically feasible for advocates of other reading approaches/methods to import American 'experts' and to finance week-long 'orientation' sessions during the school holidays.

Possibly some clarification occurs when one examines the effective ownership of SRA. SRA is a subsidiary of IBM, the second largest multinational corporation in the world, which last year made an embarrassing $6 billion profit, almost equivalent to one quarter of Australia's GNP for the year. In other words, IBM effectively owns and controls SRA. In addition to the Direct Instruction materials, SRA produces a huge range of educational 'programs' and has a virtual monopoly over sections of the educational market in this country.

Possibly one would not consider the politico-economic implications of Direct Instruction to be so alarming if at least the content of the programs was based on sound education principles and was effective in promoting reading. However, one's concern increases upon consideration of the invidious educational philosophy on which Direct Instruction is based, its underlying set of assumptions about the reading process itself and the demonstrably inane content of most of the material.

Distar Reading is a phonics-based program based on extreme behaviourist principles. While the material was originally designed for children described by the authors as 'culturally-deprived', (that is blacks from lower socio-economic groups) the authors' current claim is that their programs are effective across the board with all types of children.

It is obvious that its creators see reading as simply a matter of stimulus → response: of decoding to sound, rather than to meaning. One of the more distinctive features of Distar is choral responding to rapidly-paced phonic drill and repetition of words presented in isolation. The assumption here is that language and reading can be broken down into small units or discrete skills which can be broken down further into a series of sub-skills, placed in a hierarchical framework, and then taught a little bit at a time.

However, reading simply does not lend itself to the reduction evident in the behaviourist equation. It is now widely recognised that the reader plays an active role in reading rather than merely mechanically responding to graphic stimulus. The reader utilises a great deal of non-visual information (that is, previous experiential and linguistic knowledge) as well as attending to the graphic (visual) display[1]. Increasingly reading is being seen as a psycholinguistic process, to which the reader brings the **sum total** of his/her previous thought development, language and experience. According to this view reading is only incidentally visual. The stimulus → response construct of the behaviourists is based on a fundamental misapprehension – that reading is a wholly visual procedure.

The behaviourist explanation of reading as evidenced by the Distar programs is a superficial one, in the word's truest sense. A **variety** of strategies (as opposed to skills) are brought into play when we read – sampling, confirming, disconfirming, forwards and backwards referencing, real world and linguistic knowledge, and above all, prediction. The fluent reader utilises all of these strategies with various degrees of ease relative to his/her degree of familiarity with the content of the text. In other words, an awful lot is happening **inside** our heads when we read. But according to the behaviourists, if something is not external, if it can not be seen, it is not relevant. Thus Becker, Engelmann and company effectively deny the reader any internal life, any active participation in the reading process.

Beginning readers also attempt to 'get it all together'. Reading programs, materials and books devised for beginning readers are useful and successful when they encourage and assist the reader in this.

Since 'getting it together' is the lynchpin, the provision of whole, relevant, meaningful books and stories from the outset can not be too highly recommended. In fact, the provision of meaningful materials is mandatory if one wishes the beginning reader to develop the pivotal insight that reading is for **meaning.** I would agree with those who argue that this perception (ie the expectation that reading should make sense) is an essential prerequisite for learning to read. One thing which distinguishes people who present repeated histories of failure in learning to read is the absence of this cornerstone understanding.

* Figures quoted were supplied by an employee of SRA.

LEARNING TO READ

As the examples which follow will illustrate, much of the material in the Distar Reading Program does not make sense. Surely what this is demonstrating to children is that reading is a difficult, mystifying, if not downright incomprehensible task.

Take the following example from the beginning of Distar Reading I.

I am lāt. I āt ham on a hill.
I āt and āt. and now I am
lāt. I will run.

While each of these sentences makes sense individually, or at the focal level, the passage is characterised by lack of meaning at the global level.

Other examples confirm the impression that Distar passages are rarely meaningful at the global level,

a littl fish sat on a fat fish.
thē littl fish said, "wow."
thē littl fish did not hāt thē
fat fish. thē littl fish said,
"that fat fish is mom."

The questions based on comprehension passages for more advanced readers have also been constructed around **focal**, or individual sentence level, meaning. The passage is in fact nonsensical at the global or intersentential level.

E Read the story and answer the questions.

The con man conned three thin chaps into getting his truck unstuck. Then he drove to the next town. He said, "My stomach is groaning, my liver is moaning, and I am as thin as a pin. If I obtain some lean meat, I will eat like a pig. The more I eat, the better I will feel." So he went into a store to get some lean meat.

1. Who helped the con man get his truck unstuck?

2. How did the con man get to the next town?

3. What was he as thin as?

4. What will he eat like if he gets lean meat?

5. What happens when he eats more?

6. How much does he eat to feel a lot better?

What the above is demonstrating to children about reading is certainly worth thinking about! Sensible, sustained reading is not encouraged by the Distar programs.

Another disturbing aspect of all the Distar Reading Programs are the components for teaching children to follow instructions. These have been designed so that children learn to follow instructions generally, without regard for the constraints of content. The following are offered as typical examples,

rēad the Items

1. when the tēacher says "touch your fēēt," stand up.
2. if the tēacher says "gō," touch your ēars.

WORKSHEET 1

1. Hold up your hand.
2. When the teacher says "Go," stand up.
3. When the teacher claps, do what item four tells you to do.
4. Stamp your foot.
5. When the teacher stands up, do what item one tells you to do.

6. **Here is the rule:** If the teacher stands up, say "Stand up."
Underline the answers.

a. What should you do if the teacher stands up?
The rule doesn't say.
Stand up.
Say "Stand up."

b. What should you do if the teacher says "Stand up"?
The rule doesn't say.
Stand up.
Say "Stand up."

c. What should you do if the teacher sits down?
The rule doesn't say.
Stand up.
Say "Stand up."

While I can not see necessity for deliberate obfuscation in teaching children, I am more alarmed about the consequences of teaching children to follow directions without regard for meaning or content. Surely the hidden curriculum of such activity is to teach children not to question authority and not to be able to distinguish between sensible instructions and mumbo-jumbo. In other words, to accept what Paolo Freire has described as 'banking education', which involves '. . . the handing down of knowledge by the teacher to the students whose duty it is to receive, file and store the deposits. The more completely he (the teacher) fills the receptacles the better teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are' [2].

Further to this point, Distar lessons are totally scripted. The programs have been designed to be 'teacher-proof'. The teacher is given precise instructions on how and when to elicit choral responses from the children by 'signalling' (finger-clicking is the most common method) when to praise them and so forth. The program explicitly discourages spontaneous teacher-child inter-relationship. It is anti-diaglogue in the Freirean sense. The creators insist that the prerequisite for success is following the tasks outlined to the letter*. The use of token-reinforcers, such as lollies, smarties, chocolates, points etc, is encouraged. This contradicts the widely-held and time-honoured belief that reading and indeed learning are enjoyable and worthwhile for their own sake. Distar programs endorse the philosophy of 'never do anything for nothing' based as they are on the 20th Century twin gods of **Fear** (of losing teacher, love, approval, attention) and **Greed.**

Direct Instruction apologists attempt to justify all of these activities by quoting from research which they claim proves its superiority as a teaching method. Good test results are not at all surprising when one analyses what Distar actually 'teaches'. The content is remarkably like items in many standardised reading tests. If you only teach testlike materials, actual test results can hardly fail to improve.

* In his opening address at the Distar Conference, Wesley Becker proudly spoke of today's teachers as 'human engineers'.

Take, for instance, the large body of American research evidence. The claim is that the Direct Instruction Model is far more effective as a means of instruction than eight other Models which have been used for teaching the economically disadvantaged.

A dominant testing instrument used to produce the statistical data offered as 'proof' was the Metropolitan Achievement Test. This consists of the following components:

The Primer Reading Test, which is designed to test from mid-kindergarten to mid-first grade, has four parts:

1 Reading Letters. The child recognises capitals and lower case letters.
2 Reading Words. The child selects a picture to go with a stimulus.
3 Reading Sentences. The child marks the sentence that tells about a picture. (The test makers indicate that sentence reading is for the more able pupils.)
4 Listening to Sounds. The child shows early decoding skills including beginning and ending consonants, digraphs, and whole word discriminations.

The Primary Reading Test I, grades 1.5 to 2.4, and Primary Reading Test II, grades 2.5 to 3.4, each have three parts:

1 word knowledge;
2 word analysis, and
3 reading sentences and paragraphs.

The Elementary Reading Test, grades 3.5 to 4.9; Intermediate Reading Test, grades 5.0 to 6.9; and Advanced Reading Test, grades 7.0 to 9.5, each have a word knowledge section and a paragraph reading section in which the interpretative analysis becomes increasingly difficult. The High School Reading Test includes only the paragraph and longer selection for interpretation.

Now, let's take a random look at a Continuous Progress Test used in the Distar Reading Program.

E-B Press Continuous Progress Tests for DISTAR® **Section 2 Lessons 31–40**

READING I INDIVIDUAL SCORE SHEET

Child _____ **Teacher** _____

Lesson-day-in-program _____ **Date** _____ **Group** _____

SKILLS TESTED (Circle correct responses or all)	Number of Correct Responses	Number of Correct Responses Required To Pass	Pass + Fail 0	If Failed, Firm Child on these Tasks	
				LESSON	TASK
1 Say the Sounds Says sounds without pausing between sounds: a_1 a_2 Says word fast: b_1 b_2		3		26 27 28 29	12-13, 15-16, 19 13-15, 17 12-14, 16, 17, 20-21 2, 18-22, 16
2. Symbol Identification Identifies: ē r d a s		all		27 28 29 30	1-3, 8-10, 17 1-3, 12, 13, 16 1-3, 7-9, 16, 17 1-3, 5, 14-16
3. Rhyming Says correct initial sound: a_1 a_2 a_3 Says word: b_1 b_2 b_3		5		27 28 29 30	5-7, 3, 8, 9 4-6, 10, 7, 8 4-6, 10, 7, 8 4-6, 10, 7, 8
4. Sound it Out Says sounds without pausing between sounds presented orally: a_1 a_2 Says sounds without pausing between sounds as tester points to sounds: b_1 b_2		3		27 28 29 30	18-22 17, 18, 12-13, 20-21 18-19, 4, 21-22 16, 18-21
5. Pair Relations Adds correct sound to each row of boxes: all		all		27 28 29 30	28 28 31 26

It is apparent that the components of the MAT bear a remarkable similarity to the sub-skills already 'taught', drilled, and pre-tested by the Distar reading programs. Little wonder that other methods did not shape up so well in the research fndings!

Other standardised tests, including the Australian Neale Analysis of Reading Ability have been used as testing instruments. Once again, strong claims are made for the comparative effectiveness of the DI approach. The Australian research also has severe limitations[3]. Whether standardised reading tests do actually measure reading ability is itself questionable. This applies particularly to those tests which involve the 'reading' of long lists of words and sounds in isolation. Such tests certainly do not inform you as to whether the child has a competency in reading which s/he can take out of the classroom. The degree to which one is impressed by the research evidence cited by the champions of DI hinges, in the final analysis, on one's definition of reading[4]. One **can** condition children into recalling lists of sight words like Pavlov's dogs, but don't expect their 'reading' to be any more than barking at print! If you really want to measure a child's progress in reading, it is infinitely more revealing to ask him/her whether s/he enjoys reading, and/or to look at his/her library card[5].

I would like to propose the following as questions teachers should ask when they assess any reading kits, boxes, programs, schemes, sets of basal readers, or other materials designed for the beginning reader:

1 What underlying set of assumptions or understandings about the reading process itself does it reveal?
2 To what extent does the language used approximate that of the children who are using it?
3 How suitable and relevant is the content for the children who are using it?
4 To what extent does it promote reading itself?
5 Does it make learning to read easy or difficult for the learner?

In the light of these five criteria, Direct Instruction looks miserably inadequate. Apart from constituting a gross over-simplification of the reading process, these programs contradict the newly-released Reading K-12 Policy, in which reading is seen as a psycholinguistic process.

Finally, I would like to make an observation about the Direct Instruction advertising apparatus which brings the whole question back into the political arena where it belongs. It has been preying on the fears and insecurities of both teachers and parents which result from the present economic situation. The current 'literacy scare' gains its emotional charge from the high rate of unemployment. Parents and educators are made to feel responsible for the failure of young people to find jobs, and this makes them more than usually vulnerable to false educational prophets who are in a position to exploit these insecurities and feelings of inadequacy for their own financial gain.

Under a psuedo-scientific banner, and based as they are on negative or 'deprivation' theories of the child, learning, language and reading[6], the Distar Programs are still winning more and more adherents. It is appropriate to conclude with the words of Paolo Freire, 'More and more the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for the purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression. The oppressed as objects, as 'things' have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them'[7].

References

1 If the reader is interested in following up this point, s/he is referred to articles by Australian researchers Brian Cambourne and Peter Rousch. Various works by Frank Smith, Ken and Yetta Goodman, Marie Clay, and Weber are also recommended. The author would be happy to provide interested readers with more complete reading lists upon request.
2 Paolo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p 46.
3 More information about this will be supplied on request.
4 See recent article by Fred Gollash entitled 'A Review of Distar Reading I From A Psycholinguistic Viewpoint', published in *Reading Education*, vol 5, no 1, Autumn 1980.
5 See works of Frank Smith for more on this point.
6 See Gollash article, op cit, for more information on this point.
7 Freire, op cit, p 36.

SUPPORT AND DEPRIVATION

The Struggle for Child Care

Deborah Brennan Lynne Davis Margot Simpson

For most people working in child care in Australia, politics and economics appear to be marginal issues, nuisance factors that have to be dealt with before one can get on with the job of looking after children. Training courses in early childhood education have traditionally excluded political and economic studies and have preferred to concentrate on child psychology and pedagogical method. At the same time, academics and social commentators have tended to regard child care as a side issue, something to be done by women, so that the serious business of political and economic study can be carried on uninterrupted.

Given these attitudes it is not surprising that the level of analysis of child care as a political economic issue is very low in this country. This article seeks to counter this situation and provide a brief guide to groups working for a more adequate child care provision.

In recent years child care in Australia has been the victim of massive funding cuts and policy adjustment, yet political action within the field has been on a personal, cut-throat basis with each child care service or group of services fighting the others to secure its share of the limited and decreasing child care budget. It has only been in the last few months that political action on a national and united inter-scheme basis has arisen. The fledgling movements to change the economic reality of child care are just taking shape and are in dire need of support.

This article is part of an attempt to inform people about what is happening in the child care field and to discuss why these developments are emerging now. First, however, we need to clarify what the child care issue is about. Child care is not only about children, it is about adults, too. Indeed, as a political issue it is **primarily** about adults and predominantly about women: their social and economic position as both producers and reproducers. The social organsiation of child rearing and child caring is fundamentally determined by the sexual division of labour – a division based on the political and ideological conditions existing at a given point in time in a particular economic system. Any discussion of the provision of children's services must start from this point; because child care practices are social constructs, not universal or 'natural' givens. Even the notions of 'childhood' and 'nuclear family' as we know them today are relatively recent phenomena, created primarily by developments in the economic arena.

However, we need only to scratch the surface of the situation in advanced capitalist countries to become aware that child care problems – and their solutions – are far more complex than orthodox socialists have thus far acknowledged. Despite a strong correlation, there is no simple mirror-reflection between the demands of the economy and the provision of children's services[1].

Complex social questions like the provision of child care are not determined directly by economic exigencies. Women are not merely workers, they are also the reproducers of the next generation of producers. At this point ideology intervenes as a critical factor. Not only does the dominant ideology reinforce child raising as a private (rather than social) responsibility, it also reinforces the notion that those biologically capable of **bearing** children are those who must also do the **rearing** of them.

This intervening ideological construct of 'motherhood' (as a way of life rather than a biological event) is a primary factor in the creation of that current category of personhood: the 'working mother' (note that there is no parallel category of 'working father').

If economic factors were the sole determinant, the entry of huge numbers of women into the expanding service and manufacturing industries after the second world war would have seen a matching provision of long day care centres. Instead, pre-school was the dominant form of provision for the under-fives until the early 1970s and this form of service is largely unsuited to the needs of the 'working mother'. Thus, despite the need for women's **public** social labour, child care under capitalism has remained privatised.

Where Are We Coming From? [2]

Historically in Australia the provision of care for preschool aged children has been associated with philanthropic groups and has been regarded as a service for families who were in some way inadequate. The first kindergartens were established by wealthy women in working class 'slum' areas and were intended to 'redeem the children of working class parents'[3]. The function of the kindergarten, as perceived by its proponents, was to inculcate middle-class habits into the children of the poor. It was also intended that the influence of the kindergarten would reach

beyond the children to their parents, and enthusiasts of the kindergarten had high hopes of the powers of this movement as a tool of social reform. A view endorsed by influential people of the time was that 'if we could open more kindergartens we could almost shut the prisons'[4].

Kindergartens were very definitely not intended as child minding centres, and the fact that they operated between 9 am and 3 pm and only accepted children aged over three years ensured that they were not used for this purpose. In 1905 the Sydney Day Nursery Association was formed to assist the 'many poor working women who, through sad circumstances, are forced to fill not only the places of both father and mother, but in addition to be the breadwinner of the family'[5]. Children from birth onwards were accepted at the Sydney Day Nursery Centres and were cared for from 7 am to 6.30 pm.

In the early years the Sydney Day Nursery Association worked closely with the Kindergarten Union by having older children attend the kindergarten during its hours of opening. But there were irreconcilable philosophical differences between the two groups and in 1932 the Association established its own teacher training college in direct competition with the Kindergarten Union Teachers College. Thus the separation between educational services and day care for children was institutionalised at an early stage, at least in New South Wales. In other states there were differences and disputes between the kindergarten advocates and the providers of day care but nowhere else was the dichotomy so pronounced.

The first major governmental initiative in the field of preschool services came in 1938 when the Commonwealth Department of Health decided to set up demonstration centres in each of the capital cities to provide for the 'care, instruction, physical growth and nutrition' of young children. These were named Lady Gowrie Centres in honour of the Governor-General's wife who had been an enthusiastic supporter of them. These centres, like those of the Kindergarten Union and Sydney Day Nursery Association, were located in the inner city and intended for the children of 'poorer class homes'.

The second world war had a noticeable – if brief – impact on child care centres and kindergartens throughout Australia. The great increase in the numbers of mothers of preschool aged children in paid employment created a need for services which was beyond the capacity of existing centres. Nurseries were established in a number of factory areas and existing centres (including kindergartens) were subsidised by the government on the condition that they extended their hours and gave preference to the children of munitions workers.

During the war and the early postwar years increasing numbers of middle-class women began to seek preschool services for their own children. These were sponsored by local parent committees and were usually linked to the Kindergarten Union, churches or local councils. However, the expansion of such services throughout the fifties and sixties was slow and was greatly hampered by the withdrawal of the Commonwealth government's subsidy after the war. At the same time, propagation of ideal notions of motherhood and theories of maternal deprivation gained increasing acceptance.

The ridiculously inadequate provision of services for the under fives re-emerged as a public issue in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But this time there was a new twist to the rationale for such services: women were beginning to demand adequate child care facilities to free them from the sole responsibility for child rearing and to enable them to engage in economic and social activities beyond the home. In addition, evidence that the early years of life are crucial to a child's later emotional, physical and intellectual development led to increasing concern with providing stimulating and enriching environments for the young.

In 1972 the Liberal government passed the Child Care Act. This was not, however, motivated by any concern for the rights of women, since under the provisions of this Act places in subsidised centres were to be restricted to the children of 'needy' families, and a strict means test practically excluded those families where both parents worked.

During the December 1972 election campaign the Australian Labor Party promised to make preschool education available to every child on the grounds that this was the most important way of overcoming 'social, economic and language inequalities'. When Labor assumed office, responsibility for the implementation of this policy was included in the Education portfolio and the Minister for Education appointed the Australian Preschools Committee to inquire into the measures necessary to fulfil the election promise. But the government was under constant attack from women's groups for its narrow child care policy and at the 1973 ALP convention Labor women had a new child care resolution passed which called for a 'comprehensive' child care policy based on a priority needs system.

The report of the Australian Preschools Committee (Fry Report) was tabled in December 1973 and confirmed the worst fears of its detractors. It was heavily biased in favour of preschool services, called for professional training of all staff and provided heavier subsidies for children who attended preschool than for those in full day care. Thus, children whose parents could not afford to remain out of the workforce, or who chose not to do so, would be penalised.

In view of the changes to its own child care policy and the outcry which greeted the Fry Report, the Labor government requested the Social Welfare Commission to make a further report on the development of preschool and day care facilities. It also invited the Priorities Review Staff to comment on the Government's preschool and child care program. Both reports were presented in July, 1974.

In contrast to the Fry Report, the Social Welfare Commission's report (known as the Coleman Report) placed its emphasis on the need to provide a wide range of childhood services and support facilities. It questioned the assumption that preschool would necessarily compensate for social and economic disadvantages and urged the government to provide assistance to **all** children from needy families. The Coleman Report recommended that each local community should decide the types of care to be provided. The report of the Priorities Review Staff generally endorsed the Coleman Report, though it was critical of some of the suggested administrative arrangements – most notably, the emphasis on local councils.

The Labor government, now in possession of three reports, presented its new policy in 1974. It indicated Labor's new sensitivity to the bitter differences of opinion over child care and it embodied the principle of a wide range of services to be provided on a needs basis. The policy was to be implemented by a Children's Commission, for which an Interim Committee was established.

Labor's new policy proved extremely difficult to put into practice. With the wisdom of hindsight it is now possible to say that this was because it embodied a fundamental contradiction – on the one hand allocating funds on the basis of submissions, and on the other giving a commitment to delivering services on a needs basis. The first progress report of the Interim Committee showed that 80% of its funds had gone to preschools. The submission model of funding was proving to be well-suited to middle-class, organised and articulate groups but relatively useless for the poorer, less organised sections of society.

A new Federal parliament building for 188 politicians OR Child care for 1,200,000 children under 5 years

PRESENT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Since the advent of the Fraser government, Australia has been moving into a period of deep recession and high unemployment. Child care spending during this period has been slashed and, equally alarming, policies in this area are being moulded to reinforce the 'family's' (read 'women's') responsibility for the care of children, and also to encourage certain groups of women to stay out of the workforce.

Since 1975 estimated Federal child care funding has been cut from $74.0m to $69.3m at a time when soaring inflation has made increases necessary just to keep the level of funding stable.

Table 1
(Calculated from the last five Budget Papers)

Financial Year	Estimated Expenditure	Actual Expenditure	Actual Expenditure in 1975 ($'s)
1975/76	$74.0m	$65.0m	$65.0m
1976/77	$74.4m	$67.1m	$59.4m
1977/78	$73.3m	$71.2m	$57.1m
1978/79	$65.1m	$63.8m	$47.2m
1979/80	$69.3m		$46.6m (estimate only)

Not only has funding been cut but budgetted allocations in the child care area have consistently been underspent. This has allowed the state to claim (every year except 1978/79, when the decrease was obvious) that estimated expenditure on children's services was a significant increase on the preceding year.

Another significant implication of unspent funds is the tendency to assume that money was not spent because it was not needed. The question of need has in fact been constantly raised by the state, which insists that need must be demonstrated before funds are forthcoming. Thus, before new services are instituted submissions must be made to the Office of Child Care (or appropriate state-level bureaucracy) proving that they are needed in a certain area and outlining how such services will be implemented and used. Submissions require large amounts of time and effort for their preparation and can only be feasibly accomplished by a group that is able to remain intact for a period of several years. The members of a submitting group need to have large amounts of spare time to donate free to the gathering of data and the compilation of the submission. They also need a wide range of expertise such as statistical, accounting and political knowledge as well as an ability to write acceptable government submissions.

As one might expect, services most likely to attract funds through the submission method tend to be located in affluent middle-class areas. These areas are more likely to contain groups of women who can afford to stay home to care for their own children, a task that allows them the opportunity to become involved in the compilation of submissions. It is not surprising that mothers who stay at home are interested in services that cater for the needs of themselves and their own children, but such services are rarely of use to working mothers.

In the 15 years to 1979, the number of married women in the Australian workforce increased by 125 per cent. Nearly half of these women are responsible for young children, and yet more than 80 per cent of preschool aged children in New South Wales have no access to any form of registered children's service.

The 1972 Child Care Act stipulated that places in child care centres should be allocated first to those in need. Need was defined as:

a children of single parents;
b children of recently arrived migrants;
c children whose parents could comply with a very strict means test;
d children 'either of whose parents is sick or incapacitated'.

While it might be expected that such a policy would work in the interests of those most in need, in fact the combination of extreme shortage of child care services and the tendency for the few existing services to be located in middle-class areas has meant that, for the most part, working-class children are excluded from attendance at registered centres.

In short, despite its stated needs basis, government policy on provision of children's services virtually ensures that those most in need have least access to these services.

Government funding of children's services, despite being grossly inadequate, is being cut further. Not only are existing services being threatened, but new services have little hope of getting off the ground. Those new schemes which are getting funding tend to be in areas where the local community has mastered the submission system, ie stable middle-class areas.

In addition, the schemes that are currently attracting government funding are those that rely on cheap home-based or volunteer female labour. Many of these schemes are of little use to the children of working parents.

In the last five years, the Fraser government has begun to fund a range of children's services that were previously unavailable. Whereas the Federal Budget used to allocate funds specifically and exclusively to preschools and child care centres, the present Federal government is now using its dwindling children's services budget to fund playgroups, occasional care centres and family day care schemes, all of which rely on cheap or free, and non-unionised female labour. While these new services are both necessary and worthwhile, it must be realised that they are expanding at the expense of traditional centre based care. This of course holds implications for the professional child care workers who staff such centres.

The kinds of services which are gaining momentum at present also tend to reinforce the place of women in the home. Either because, as with playgroups and occasional care centres, they can only be used by women who are in a position to donate their labour regularly during working hours or because, as with family day care, they utilise the labour of home-based women who mind children in their own homes for as little as 50 cents an hour per child.

The situation in the children's services area is becoming desperate. More and more women are joining the workforce (a large proportion of them as part-time workers) and their children are needing care. At the same time federal funding of such care is being cut, and channelled into areas which reinforce the place of women as mothers in the home.

If unchallenged, such a situation can only worsen, to the detriment of women and children alike. Fortunately various groups are beginning to form to question state policy and work to change it.

In the final section of this article we discuss some of these groups and the ways in which they are responding to the situation outlined above.

RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Women's Electoral Lobby

WEL has been campaigning for some time to have the cost of child care allowed for taxation purposes as an expense incurred in earning an income. This campaign has involved petitioning members of federal parliament, and encouraging parents to claim child care expenses as tax deductions and to lodge objections when they are disallowed.

One might question the ultimate wisdom of a strategy which adds to the range of mechanisms returning more to those with higher incomes than to those on low incomes. On the other hand, this is a progressive move in the sense that it asserts that providing care for children is as necessary to earning a living as is entertaining clients to 'business' lunches, or making sabbatical trips to the northern hemisphere. No guesses as to the sex of those who most commonly engage in the latter activities! The recognition of child care costs as necessarily incurred in earning an income would, we suspect, be progressive in another sense: it would be one of the few such tax deductible expenses (and certainly one of the largest) available to most low income earners and especially to women, given the nature of the work in which they are mostly engaged.

WEL recently organised a one-day seminar in Sydney on child care, in which they attempted to foster discussion of a range of perspectives on the child care problem, from left to right. We found it fairly difficult to envisage what such perspectives might look like (except, perhaps, for the extreme right position that it should not exist at all, or only in very exceptional circumstances). As it turned out, at least half the day was dominated by a discussion of permanent part-time work, as a solution to this and (it seemed) many other economic and social problems. Particularly prominent exponents of this line of thinking are the Liberal MLA for Vaucluse, Rosemary Foot, and the group known as Future Lobby, of which she is a member.

They attribute a number of advantages to the concept of permanent part-time work: most relevant in terms of the present discussion is that they appear to see it as reducing or eliminating the need for child care services. This, presumably, would happen because people sharing jobs might also share child minding, spouses might between them have sufficient 'non-working' time to eliminate their need for child care, and because single parents might only need half-time-care[6]. Perhaps it might also happen because parents on part-time wages could no longer afford the cost of child care.

We doubt that there will be any large-scale voluntary adoption of permanent part-time work, unless it is accompanied by 'fulltime' pay. Voluntary (and drastic) reduction of income is hardly likely to hold great appeal for those less affluent groups of workers whose principal motivation is not the intrinsic pleasures of work itself, but the avoidance of poverty.

In addition, the picture of why people 'need' child care implicit in these proposals is a very narrow one, directly tied to the amount of time which parents spend in paid employment.

It is worth noting, albeit briefly in this context, that two other aspects of child care provisions were the subject of particularly critical observations by participants in the conference: the submissions model; and a number of aspects of family day care (long day care for up to four children in the minder's own home), particularly the levels of pay and working conditions of the care givers. One conference participant resurrected the argument put forward in one of the original government reports recommending support for family day care schemes[7], that if minders were paid at higher rates (ie commensurate with wages paid to unskilled workers), the schemes might attract 'the wrong kind of person'.

Children's Services Action

Children's Services Action was formed by a number of people

who had participated in the WEL conference, and who were dismayed at the amount of attention focussed on permanent part-time work. The group is seeking to increase community awareness about the political implications of the provision (or non-provision) of children's services, and to fight for an increase in the number and range of such services as well as a simplification of the bureaucratic procedures governing their provision[8].

Community Child Care (NSW)

Community Child Care was established in 1978 with a grant from the Family and Children's Services Agency (an autonomous state government body). Its functions to date have been principally of an information and referral kind, supporting the efforts of community groups trying to improve children's services in their local area, liaising with government departments on their behalf, and assisting in the establishment of such groups where none already exist. CCC has also been active in disseminating information about children's services and has published a kit designed to provide information about existing services and to assist groups trying to develop new services[9].

National Coalition

At the National Child Care Conference held in Adelaide in May this year, a resolution was passed establishing a national child care coalition. A steering committee consisting of two delegates from each state and territory in Australia was appointed, and the aims of the coalition were described as follows.

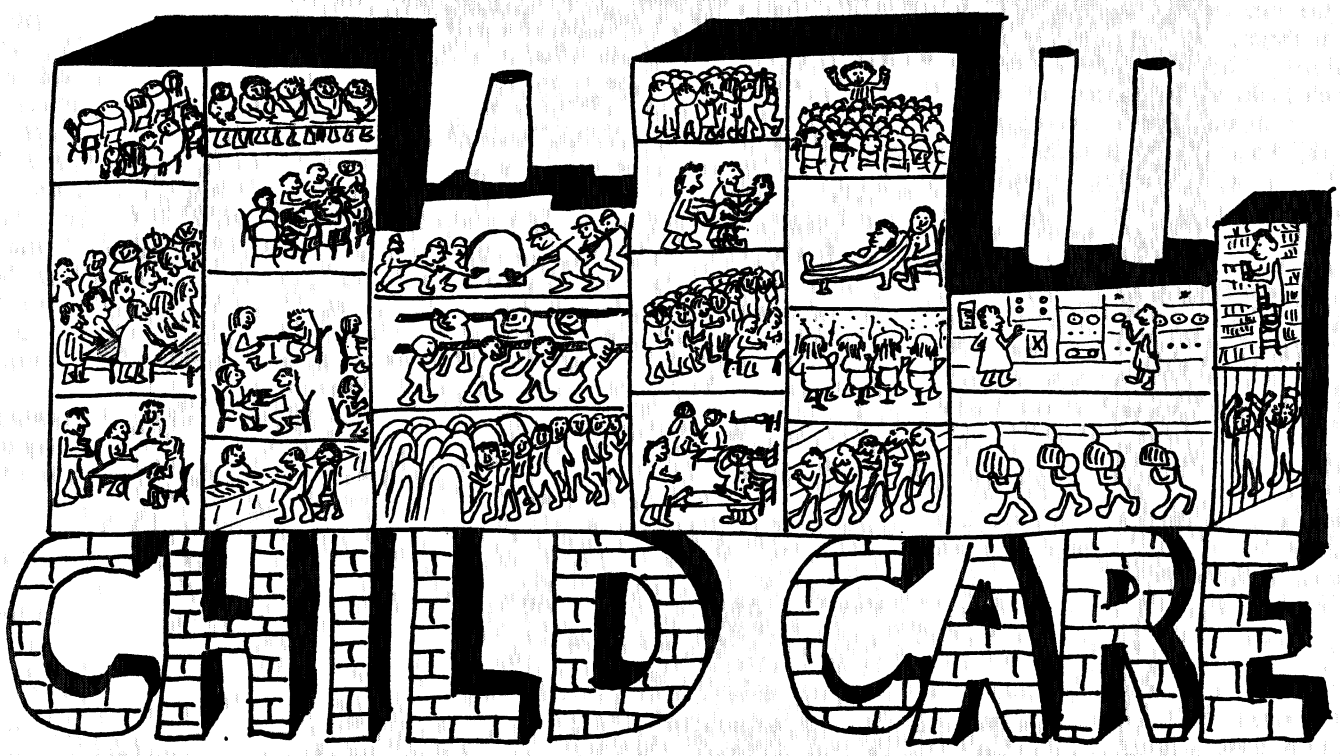
To campaign for:

1 a review of priorities for the allocation of resources;
2 an increase in total funding of children's services;
3 a review of the bases of funding; and
4 a simplification of the procedures for funding.

It should be noted that the establishment of this coalition, and the Women's Electoral Lobby taxation campaign, are the only truly national responses described in this section. The other groups and activities described here are specific to New South Wales (and, indeed, they are all centred in Sydney). This is entirely a reflection of the location of the authors of this article, and the activities with which we are familiar. We do not mean to suggest that similar responses are not happening elsewhere: we fervently hope that they are, and we would like very much to hear about them.

References

1 See eg Riley D (1979), 'War In The Nurseries', *Feminist Review* 2.
2 This section is drawn largely from Spearritt P 'Child Care And Kindergartens in Australia, 1890-1975' in Langford and Sebastian, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia*, 1979, pp 10-38.
3 *Ibid*, p 10.
4 *Ibid*, p 17.
5 *Ibid*, p 18.
6 Rosemary Foot, in her address to the conference, described Future Lobby as 'an action group committed to work for child care policies with major emphasis on promoting and supporting the nurturing role of the family and its network of relatives and friends'.
7 Social Welfare Commission (1974), *Project Care*, pp 42-43.
8 Children's Services Action is only recently formed and welcomes all new members. It can be contacted c/o 34 Liverpool Street, Sydney 2000.
9 Kits and other information about Community Child Care can be obtained from 34 Liverpool Street, Sydney 2000.



RED REVIEWS

What Makes Kids Kids?

Changing Childhood, **edited by Martin Hoyles, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, London, 1979, $9.00 approximately.**

As the title implies, this collection of readings emphasises that childhood is a social and cultural concept that has developed and changed over time and is still changing.

The book is divided into five sections. The first is a collection of articles on the history and politics of childhood. Following this there is a specially written pictorial essay which attempts to explain the changes in the concept of childhood by looking at how it has been portrayed in the various visual media over time. Then there is a reasonably large section entitled 'Cross-cultural Perspectives' which looks at the concept of cultural deprivation and IQ tests, the experience of childhood in non-European cultures and racial minorities, non-sexist child-rearing, a description of the various 'ideologies' of childcare, theories of child development, feminism and psychology, sex roles. The fourth section gives accounts of the school student strikes in Britain in the early 1900s and of the school students' unions that started there in the 1970s. Finally there is a section which looks at the child development theories which underly the secondary English curriculum and underpin the assessments that are made of the mathematical learning ability of infants and primary children.

Most of the articles in the collection come from magazines etc, and are short (many are too short) and easy to read. Short descriptive pieces or poems are interspersed between the major articles. Some of these and some of the descriptive articles could be used as a basis for discussion in high school classes.

The final three sections of the book are particularly interesting as they discuss particular concrete situations or concepts. For example one article ('Who's Deprived' by Wendy Farrant) discusses nursery school education by comparing the experiences of English and Zambian children. The writer points out that in Zambia children's activities are integrated into the normal everyday life of the adult eg, helping with the growing of crops or housework. These activities and the involvement in adult life provide the motor, sensory and social stimulation necessary for the child's development without the need for special nursery programs with children's art, children's stories etc. Also, games are developed by the children to suit their needs rather than being manufactured by adults to meet developmental needs defined by adults. As a result the Zambian children are seen in European eyes as being precocious in their development. The author also refers to a study which found that Zambian children performed poorly compared to European children in doing an IQ test with pencil and paper. But when they were allowed to do the same test in three dimensions, using wire, a material they were familiar with, they performed better than the European kids.

Another article ('Some Thoughts on Freud's Discovery of Childhood' by Richard Appignanesi) suggests that the coloniser-colonised relationship involved the projection of the concept of childhood into other cultures. Developing Philipe Aries' theme he goes on to suggest that the concepts of childhood that developed in the 17th and 18th centuries involved ideas of dependency which developed during the mercantilist phase of capitalism –one of colonial expansion. The Robinson Crusoe-Man Friday story illustrates this. The rest of the article goes on to discuss theories of human development from Rousseau's time up to Freud.

An article by Ros Coward entitled 'The Making of the Feminine' relates the reinterpretation of Freud's work by the French analyst Jacques Lacan to feminism. She says that Lacan emphasises the importance of language and its effect on the development of the child into a sexed object. The child has to change from something that is virtually undifferentiated from its mother's body to a differentiated and differentiating (and therefore language-using) subject. 'The existence of language and culture necessitates that the individual finds a place there – either that or falls ill'. This is not a slow process of maturation but a process of 'splitting' where the child is forced to become a language-using subject so that it can make its demands. The infant has to first form an image of itself that is separate from its dependence on its mother. It then has to define itself within the pre-existent linguistic and cultural order. The child can only represent difference – including sexual difference – in terms of those representations already available. This interpretation allows the development of a view of human sexual development that is not dependent on a 'biologistic' interpretation that assumes an inherent inferiority of one sex. It also allows the possibility of interpreting how social practices impose inequalities through their transmission in the process of differentiation and the adoption of language.

In 'Ideologies of Childcare' Lee Comer looks at the various 'ideologies' of childcare that have come and gone since World War II. In two other articles, a parent discusses the problems she faces in developing a non-sexist child-rearing practice and a lesbian mother looks at how her relationship with her daugher has been changing over time.

An interesting article in Part Five of the book entitled 'Children, Logic and Learning', looks at the tests, based on Piaget's work, that are used to assess the grasp that infants and primary children have of logical (especially mathematical) concepts. They argue that Piaget's work, although basically sound, is too rigid in assuming 'invariant stages of development' in the mental development of children. They also argue that tests based on Piaget's work often fail to account for the 'social logic' of the test and the teacher-pupil relationship. Pupils give precedence to the social logic of the situation rather than the formal logic of the problem and give the answer they think the teacher wants. When tests are adjusted for this factor, a far higher percentage of children give correct answers.

While the descriptive and cross-cultural sections of the book are interesting and useful, the overall impression given by the first two sections of the book is fairly weak. The first section is supposed to provide some historical background and overall perspective for what follows. However, much of the historical material is apparently contradicted by much of the psycho-analytic and psychology based analysis of childhood.

Most of the historical material takes its cue from the work of the French historian Philipe Aries, especially his 'Centuries of Childhood'. He argues, mainly using documentary evidence, paintings etc, that the concept of childhood is relatively

recent, having developed in the last 300 years or so. People in the Middle Ages, according to Aries, had no concept of a period called 'childhood' that was separate and distinct from the rest of a person's life, eg medieval paintings often show children as scaled down adults without any of the 'normal' physiological attributes that children have.

Hoyles endorses Aries' view but criticises him for not pointing out that the concept of childhood was developed first for male children of the up and coming bourgeoisie. That childhood and the associated development of schooling came late (in the 19th and 20th centuries) for both middle class female children and working class children in general. Firestone makes this point and also compares the position of children with that of women arguing that children must be liberated from childhood. The article on early childhood education in China seems to be saying that the Chinese always recognised the needs of children. This picture is in complete contradiction to the Aries model which describes European experience. The introduction doesn't really come to terms with this and other contradictions.

The picturial essay by Peter Fuller makes a critique of Aries, arguing that many of the paintings of children that were done in the Middle Ages were 'official' paintings of royal children who were used as bargaining counters in diplomatic intrigues etc, and the child-like aspects of the subjects were de-emphasised. He says that underneath this 'official' style of painting there was an unofficial one which took into account a concept of childhood. This unofficial concept developed into the full-blown concept of childhood in later generations. He argues against such people as Firestone, saying that childhood is imposed out of necessity because of the physiological immaturity of human beings at that stage. He states that the development of the concept of childhood is one of the progressive reforms of the bourgeoisie and should be supported by the left rather than opposed.

There is a tendency to use either Aries-type historical analysis on the one hand or psychoanalytic (mainly Freud) and child development (mainly Piaget) writings on the other. The later two groups of writings tend to suggest that childhood is an immutable category and are in apparent contradiction to the Aries-type approach. Sometimes the two approaches are used in the same article without any attempt to link them. Aries is in effect being used as a surrogate for a Marxist analysis.

There are dangers in adopting a 'biological determinism' approach which assumes childhood to be an immutable category. It could lead to an uncritical acceptance of traditional teaching methods, supposedly geared to the child's needs (although teaching methods based on Piaget's work tend to be progressive) and too ready an acceptance of the total separation of the world of children from that of adults.

At a practical level the book is quite useful, having short articles, extracts, poems etc, that could form a useful basis for discussion. The historical and theoretical articles are too short to be anything but suggestive and general. Their weakness is mainly an indication of how little theoretical and empirical work has been done. There is simply no Marxist or 'left' theory of childhood.

Peter Swift

RED LETTERS

The Collective and Readers,

I read with interest the last issue on primary education, as well as previous issues, particularly where they relate to the 'Great Standards Debate'.

As an ex-infants teacher I'm particularly concerned with the backlash against progressive moves in education and the implications this has for young children's freedom to learn at their own pace. When outside standards are imposed on kids, I fear for the squashing of their natural curiosity and interest in discovering for themselves how the world works – through their creative and curious play.

While I welcome ideas and debate around literacy programs I'm wondering about the apparent lack of a corresponding interest in numeracy. For I remember with great gratitude Infant Method lectures from my training course, where in the process of teaching me how to go about allowing children to discover the interrelatedness of the number world, I unravelled some of the great mathematical mysteries by playing with unifix cubes, buttons, matches, cuisinaire rods etc, and regained a sense of beauty and wonder at how it all fitted together so well.

While I was adept as a kid at manipulating symbols on a page, knew the twelve times tables and usually came up with the right answer, I had very little idea why it was right. Not until the ripe old age of twenty-two did I find out how multiplying was connected to adding, why square numbers were square, that numbers were symbolic shorthand and so on almost to infinity.

I've been away from the classroom for a few years and feel out of touch with current trends. I'd like to hear from anyone working in the field via letters or articles, if Piaget is now passe, if kids are getting the chance to discover through their concrete experience of **things**, the inevitable laws of mathematical relationships or is it all going back to the bad old days where rules and relationships were learned by rote in a vacuum, leading to the all too general paranoia of students in high school, of anything that can't be symbolised with a word.

Maths was given to me like a doctor's prescription – 'take this three times a day dear, and you'll get better'. I'd like to know if kids now are finding out why and how the pills work.

Christine Baxter

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