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CHANGING SOCIETAL AND FAMILIAL TRENDS: CHANGING TEACHER STRATEGIES

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Teachers today are working in an era of rapid and complex change. Not only must they be aware of these societal and familial changes, but they must also know how to respond to the changed needs of individual children within the context of their changing families and society. It is no longer appropriate for teachers to operate on the basis of out-of-date stereotypes depicted by texts and teachings which have been based on earlier life-styles and circumstances. Teacher education institutions must also play their part in ensuring that both pre and post-service teachers are kept abreast of these rapid societal and familial changes and of recommended strategies arising out of these changes, if teachers are to effectively meet the needs of individual children within the context of their families and society as they exist today.

CHANGES IN WESTERN SOCIETY

Within western society, there has been a change from a predominantly industrialised society to an economy based on the creation and distribution of information (Naisbett, 1982). The education system has traditionally attempted to assist children to fit into an industrialised society by emphasizing the work ethic, conformity, the ability to follow directions and the necessity of meeting time and standardisation constraints. The new traits of independence, creative thinking and literacy skills will now be needed by children to cope with the new economy that is based on information creation and distribution. The formal mode of learning currently in vogue needs to be replaced by more informal means to develop the independent and creative skills of young children.

Rapidly changing technology is affecting every aspect of our living: the environment, work place, industry, transport, communications, medicine, educational institutions, as well as cultural and sporting activities.

The new technologies pose challenges to the society and to its members ... There is the need for people to understand and to use the new technology, to be positively oriented to its potential benefits, to feel that they are masters, in control, rather than manipulated puppets. They need to be able to withstand its potential dehumanising, depersonalising and isolating effects, and to maintain their own priorities in a situation of information overload. They need to be aware of the social and moral implications of the technological revolution and to be able to make a genuine contribution to the resolution of the dilemmas that the applications of the technology create. There is the strong likelihood that the information technologies will exert major effects on both teaching and on styles of learning. (Watts, 1987, p. 12)

A positive self-concept, awareness of appropriate technology and human communication skills are necessary in order for individuals to cope successfully in this new, highly technological world. The advent of the communication satellite has meant that the world has become a smaller place where everyone

is a world citizen and part of a world-wide economy. It is crucial, therefore, for children to develop awareness, understanding and respect for other cultures if they are to live and communicate effectively on our small planet.

Individuals are rapidly realising that the earth's resources are not limitless and that the consequences of waste and mismanagement of the environment are life-threatening. Short-term exploitation is no longer acceptable and decisions are now needing to be made within longer term time frames. As well as environmental awareness, decision-making is another skill that must receive re-newed emphasis in schools, particularly as children are faced with making a myriad of choices in our multifaceted society, where more and more options are available to individuals in their daily lives (e.g. lifestyles, food, dress, entertainment). Traditionally, children in our primary schools have been provided with very limited choices and therefore limited opportunities to develop their decision-making and problem-solving abilities at school.

The advent of television and the communication satellite has meant that information is now available almost instantly. Educators need to consider, therefore, how they can lay the groundwork in the early years for productive citizenship, since they need to develop in children those qualities necessary for later community involvement and political understanding.

Finally, the current change from large institutions to self-help necessitates the development of personal networks. It is vital for children to develop independence, initiative and self-reliance. Don Edgar, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, has been quoted as saying,

> We have produced the 'useless child', excluded from the productive life of the community, brought up as a privileged guest who is thanked and praised for helping out rather than as one responsibly sharing in contributing to family and community well-being ... Perhaps some re-examination of the usefulness of education to children in a changing society is essential. (Drislane, 1990, p. 32)

CHANGES IN THE FAMILY

Rapid changes are also taking place in the families in which children are being reared today. Bronfenbrenner (1984) delineates the three worlds of childhood as the home, school and community, but he emphasizes that the family is the most critical context for the growth of children as human beings. He claims that research shows the family to be the most powerful, the most economical and the most humane system for not only making, but also keeping human beings human. The capacity for the family to function effectively, however, depends on what happens in the other two contexts. If strong links are forged between the three contexts of home, school and community, then we accrue huge profits in terms of human growth and happiness, and ultimately of course, in terms of the gross national product. If these links should break down, however, then the consequences are devastating.

The problem is that the contexts in which young children are living today are undergoing such rapid change, that the world is no longer predictable or controllable for some children, placing them at considerable risk. Let us consider some of the changes taking place in the family contexts of Australian, and in particular, Western Australian children.

1. INCREASE IN MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT

Increasingly mothers are entering the labour force. In Western Australia 51.7% of women (15 years and over) are in the work force, while 37% of married mothers with children under the age of 5 years were in the workforce in 1986. This means that someone has to be there to mind the children while the mother is at work: day care (80%), live-in help, neighbour, friend, relative, father (1 in 11) and/or after-school care.

2. INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ONE-PARENT FAMILIES

One parent families have almost doubled in the period from 1969 to 1986 so that 11.00% of all families with dependent children in Western Australia are one parent families. An even greater number of marriages break down to the point of separation, desertion, wife-bashing, child abuse or conflict-ridden "hanging in there" type situations. One in five homes in Australia is affected by domestic violence and 17% of women and 22% of men condone the use of physical violence by a man against his partner under some circumstances.

3. INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF RECONSTITUTED FAMILIES

Re-marriage gives children three or four parents instead of just two, and often both step-brothers and step-sisters. In 1986 in Western Australia, 8.3% of children under the age of 15 years were living in a step family situation while 5.9% were living with defacto parents.

4. AGEING POPULATION

People are living longer than in the past so that there are now more grandparents (particularly grandmothers) still living. Seventy three percent of women over the age of 70 are left on their own. Frequently they move in with a son or a daughter and their family, or separated sons or daughters move back with them for cheap housing. The family context of child rearing in these homes is very different from that in the nuclear family household.

5. CHILDREN ARE FEWER IN NUMBER AND COME LATER

Couples are choosing to have fewer children and to have them later. In 1986 in Western Australia 17.3% of first births occurred 5 or more years after marriage and 21% were to women aged 30 years and over. In addition, there has been a significant swing to the 2 child family. Sometimes children are seen as interfering with the couple's well established, free and highly mobile life-style. This means that there are fewer siblings and a smaller family size for children born into such families. In addition, 18.5% of all babies born in Western Australia in 1986 were to mothers who were not married at the time, making the family context different again for these children.

6. GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY

Modern families are on the move. The well-to-do move to better jobs and the poor to find a job or to escape their financial obligations. Australians are the most mobile home-changers in the world and West Australians the most mobile in Australia. In 1986, 20% of the Western Australian population moved within the previous 12 months compared with a national average of 15.8%. This means that demands for childcare, baby-sitters and home-help frequently go outside the family into public sources which cannot keep pace with the demand.

7. COMPLEXITY OF DAILY SCHEDULES

The typical family is fast becoming one in which both parents work. In Western Australia this is 75% of families where all the children are of school age and 48.4% when the youngest child is under the age of 3 years (1986). This factor, combined with the other factors already discussed, produces a situation in which families are living by a daily schedule that is extremely hectic and stressful. Parents have to try to co-ordinate family demands with job demands in a world where everyone has to be transported at least twice a day in different directions and at the same time.

8. EROSION OF NEIGHBOURHOODS

Family life is further complicated by a breakdown of interpersonal links

at the local level. A situation exists in which many parents go to work, relatives are scattered all over the country, and neighbours change frequently. Thus there are fewer persons to turn to for practical help or emotional support in times of emergency or stress.

9. SEGREGATION OF NEIGHBOURHOODS

Neighbourhoods are becoming increasingly segregated in terms of social class, ethnic background, age and marital status. This makes for reduced neighbourhood support. In relation to ethnic background alone, in 1986 Western Australia recorded the highest proportion (27.5%) of overseas born persons of all the Australian States and Territories, although the proportion of non-English speaking background in Western Australia is the same as for Australia generally (15%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1988).

10. UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment in Western Australia is currently running at 5.4% for married fathers, 3.5% for married mothers and 7.2% for sole parents. Unemployment places tremendous stress on families and leads to a diminution of the father's status as a role model and authority figure. In the words of one unemployed father,

Before, when I was at work, the kids were completely disinterested, couldn't care less, now I get the old ribald remarks. If I say I'm going for a job the little girl will say, "You won't get it".
(Burns and Goodnow, 1985, p. 84)

The children also lose prestige with their peers when their fathers are unemployed due to problems in keeping up appearances and returning hospitality, resulting in lowered self-esteem.

11. INCREASED POVERTY

One in five children in Australia grows up in poverty. As the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. This is despite the fact that our Prime Minister, Mr. Hawke, said in 1986 "We set ourselves this first goal: by 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty." Since then we have seen the release of the Burdekin Report which paints a tragic picture of a minimum of 25,000 homeless youth drifting in a shadowy world of prostitution, drugs, disease and violence. Hawke now says that he meant that there would be no financial need for children to live in poverty by 1990. Unfortunately however, not all impoverished backgrounds are due solely to the lack of finance. The challenge for us then is to come up with innovative ways to meet the needs of the children of family change: new kinds of families living under new kinds of circumstances.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Bronfenbrenner (1984) puts forward his third party principle in order to forge links between home and school. He maintains that the support of a third party makes it possible for an "at risk" parent-child dyad to survive. The most potent source of support is a child's father, and next, coming a close second, is the mother's mother or child's grandmother. After relatives come friends, neighbours, co-workers and finally professionals. Teachers are therefore going to be called upon to provide essential third party support to children at risk because of their family situation, and to forge links between home and school.

Support strategies which should prove helpful in assisting children to better cope with societal and familial changes include:

* the provision of activities which enable children to express their feelings and to resolve conflict in acceptable ways, for example,

plenty of free choice, uninterrupted playtime;

a strong music/movement programme; emphasis on dramatic play; and

creative activities such as painting, clay etc.;

* the provision of opportunities for children to be successful in controlling their lives. Learning experiences should be matched to children's ability, decision-making and problem-solving skills should be developed; and use should be made of advance organisers;

* consistency in setting limits and expectations for children. One must not, however, assume that because a child comes from a single parent family the child is necessarily disadvantaged;

* the setting of reasonable limits for a child's behaviour at school in a loving, yet firm manner;

* enhancing children's self-esteem. Every child should be made to feel important and worthwhile;

* less emphasis on giving children information and greater emphasis on developing understanding of key concepts and problem-solving skills, particularly in the area of mathematics;

* environmental studies as an integral part of the school curriculum;

* greater emphasis on the total literacy approach within a context that is meaningful and relevant to the child's everyday living;

* the development of decision-making by the provision of real choices to children (e.g. freely chosen, relevant, interesting projects to research);

* the development of children's awareness of their responsibility to their family and community;

* ready access for all children to new technologies and the development of competence and understanding in their use (e.g. calculators, computers).

In conclusion, I believe that it is the professional responsibility of all teachers to keep abreast of the latest demographic and sociological trends and to do all within their power to support those children and their families who are "at risk". It is acknowledged that it is difficult to overcome the disadvantage of the home, but if a teacher can be the person who makes the essential difference in just one or two children's lives, then the extra effort will have been worthwhile.

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