

A SCHOOL FOR PARENTS: AN INNOVATION IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Edna M. Nash
University of British Columbia

Abstract

This paper describes the preparation, planning and operation of a parent education project in an elementary school in British Columbia based on Adlerian theory and practice. Initiated by a joint committee of teachers and parents, between 50 and 60 parents attended each of the 21 sessions held from September to May. Sessions were comprised of leadership training, "open-centre" family counselling, parent-led small groups and recorded feedback. Progress is noted for each section as well as the teacher supervised playroom. Reported benefits to the school and families support the appropriateness of school based parent education and the need for trained counsellors to facilitate it.

Résumé

Cet article décrit la préparation, la planification et l'exécution d'un projet visant l'éducation de parents. Ce projet, s'inspirant de la théorie d'Adler, se déroula dans une école élémentaire en Colombie Britannique. Mis sur pied par un groupe de parents et d'enseignants, ce projet regroupa environ 50 parents qui assistèrent à une série de 21 sessions se déroulant de septembre à mai. Le contenu des sessions était le suivant: l'entraînement au leadership, la consultation en famille, de petits groupes dirigés par un parent et l'information en retour enregistré sur bande. On indique les progrès pour chaque phase de même que pour la salle de jeu surveillé par un enseignant. On relève les avantages qu'un tel projet procura aux familles et à l'école. De tels résultats mettent en relief la valeur d'un tel travail auprès des parents et du besoin d'avoir des conseillers prêts à le réaliser.

Although children have the right to live in an environment free from abuse and to have parental support and guidance, the provision of appropriate basic training for parenthood continues to be haphazard (Berger, 1975). In spite of the accepted profound influence of parents as the initial educators of their children, no agency has been given the mandate to prepare parents for their educational role. In a rapidly changing society which is moving away from the autocratic tradition towards democratic attitudes and relationships, adults generally are unprepared for this change in terms of parenting skills. In British Columbia, parent education is carried on by organizations and individuals committed to the benefits of effective parenting. This paper describes an innovative parent education program in an elementary school based on the Democratic Education Model (Christensen, 1969), which has implications for the school system and counsellor for education.

Historically, Alfred Adler originated the "open-centre" format in which parents and their children are counselled before an audience. His main purpose for developing this method and opening

the more than 30 child guidance centres in Vienna and Berlin in the 1920's and early 30's was to train teachers. Rudolf Dreikurs (1964), a director of one of the centres, on immigrating to North America, not only emphasized teacher training, but also focussed on parent education. Through writing for parents and pioneering parent-led study groups, he expounded on the new tradition for raising children in a democracy (Morse, 1977). In North America, Dreikurs, Corsini, Lowe, Sonstegard (1959), and Christensen (1969) have continued as leaders in this model of parent education.

The writer introduced the Democratic Education Model to the Staff of Discovery Elementary School in Surrey at a professional day in June 1975. This school had already implemented an holistic, thematic approach to curriculum which embodied continuous, noncompetitive progress, family grouping, team teaching and peer teaching, and had, since its beginning, involved parents in support of a wide variety of school activities. Since the staff found the Adlerian theoretical framework to be consistent with their educational philosophy, it became a continuation of the

growth process. Staff members began attending Adlerian courses, workshops and summer programs to enhance their understanding of behaviour, and their effectiveness in further developing cooperation, responsibility and self-discipline among their students. Finally, in the spring of 1977, the Staff and Parent Executive members began an intensive planning session. From March until July, the group laid the groundwork for the fall program.

PREPARATION FOR THE SCHOOL

Encouraged by the staff, the parents gave two performances to audiences of 250 parents and children of "Bows and Arrows", a 45 minute play depicting the dilemma of today's parents (Lane, 1976). The last performance was followed by a family counselling demonstration. All parents were invited for a follow-up interview with the demonstration family and for a panel presentation on the regular family meeting which was given by three parents who had applied democratic principles in their family setting while taking a classroom management course with the writer. Inspired by this introduction to a theory for understanding their children and to principles for improving attitudes and behaviour, the executive arranged for the writer to conduct four workshop sessions during May and June for interested parents. These sessions focussed on such basic assumptions as equality, family constellation, vertical and horizontal motivation, social interest, the mistaken goals of behaviour, encouragement and logical consequences. The attendance ranged from 44 parents and staff on the first night to 57 parents and staff on the last night with a school population of 200 children. In July, the entire staff and a group of these parents attended six evening sessions of "open-centre" family education led by Achi Yotam of Israel who had conducted three consecutive summer programs at U.B.C. Yotam met with this group to describe the School for Parents in Tel Aviv (McAbee, 1976), which is a variation of the Community Parent-Teacher Education Centers (Lowe, 1974). That is, parents are required to make a two night per week commitment, the first to observe in an "open-centre" and the second to participate in a parent led group of 10 to 15 members. The group is to discuss the centre sessions including family atmosphere, recommendations, and understanding gained; to consider how each might apply the principles from the session to his/her family situation; and to report on progress, thereby giving the group the opportunity to encourage and to problem solve with members having difficulties with some aspect of their child rearing. This meeting with Yotam ended with the general plan for the '77-'78 Discovery School for Parents.

In early September the following decisions were made by the Staff and parents:

- 1) that the School would be held on one evening.
- 2) that the writer would be the counsellor and resource person for the project.
- 3) that the format of the evening would be:
 - 6:30- 7:30: Leadership training, preparation for session.
 - 7:30- 8:30: "Open-centre" with families-in-focus.
 - 8:45- 9:45: Small groups.
 - 9:45-10:05: Feedback session.
- 4) that a staff member would be the chairperson responsible for organization such as registration, meeting rooms, small group make-up, and the feedback session.
- 5) that two staff members would supervise the playroom.
- 6) that a parent coordinator would schedule "families-in-focus", make up agenda for the 6:30-7:30 meeting, supervise the lending library and preparation of materials for groups.
- 7) that a staff member would keep recorder's reports for all interviews.
- 8) that an interested local secondary counsellor knowledgeable about the model would do an intake interview with all families volunteering for the centre.
- 9) that two parents would co-lead each group and that one teacher or counsellor would be assigned to each group for leader support.
- 10) that there would be 21 sessions, 8 before December and 13 from mid-January to May.
- 11) that a fee of \$25 would cover all sessions or \$10 before Christmas and \$15 after.
- 12) that the School would be publicized through the "Lunch-kit Express" (a weekly school newsletter featuring such items as: family fun, puzzles, games, creative stories, science experiments, French activities, a library section and places to go), local agencies, and the B.C. Association of Adlerian Psychology newsletter, workshops and courses.

As this joint-committee meeting of dedicated educators ended, two concerns remained: (1) the lack of confidence of the parents to lead other parents on the topic of parenting; (2) whether a sufficient number of parents would pay a tuition to learn parenting skills. Although the leaders had participated in the spring workshop and in the weekly training and problem solving sessions, they were eager for further preparation. Staff members who had worked closely with them and observed them in small group activities dealing with school topics, firmly believed they could handle the task. Leaders made choices relevant to them from the following suggestions: (1) reread *Children: The Challenge* (Dreikurs, 1964); (2) refer to *Raising A Responsible Child* (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1973) and *The Practical Parent: The ABC's of Child Discipline* (Corsini & Painter, 1975); (3) attend "Encouragement" workshop for parents conducted by John Taylor, Ph.D., of Salem, Ore., (4) plan to attend Study Group Leaders' Workshops led by Clair Hawes, M.Ed., (Hawes, 1977) or by Gary McKay, Ph.D., on S.T.E.P. Program (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976).

On the first night, attendance totalled more

than 50 and had averaged between 50 and 60 consistently. With four sessions remaining at the time of this writing, progress of each section of the School for Parents follows:

LEADERSHIP TRAINING

The early 6:30 to 7:30 meetings of all the School for Parents personnel (21 teachers, parents, counsellors involved), focussed on the leaders' reports from the previous week; on the further clarification of the family counselling sessions; on leadership skills and on the intake interview information. Leaders shared positive things about their groups, as well as their concerns about group cohesiveness, group membership, the family-in-focus and questions on the counselling process. Techniques such as universalization, linking and dealing with a dominant member were demonstrated and practiced, (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976). Family leaders were encouraged to stress the understanding of family atmosphere, constellation and interaction. Having been alerted to a weakness in this area, the counsellor also emphasized that the purpose of the centre was for the audience to encourage and to learn through the family-in-focus, and that the purpose of the small group was to understand family dynamics, not to judge. Similarly, when questions about the counselling process required further explanation, the counsellor re-emphasized points in question such as, goal disclosure and the recognition reflex prior to and during the interview with the children. Finally, the intake counsellor reported on the family for that evening. The two main purposes of interviewing families beforehand were: (1) to screen out families inappropriate for open-centre family education such as the multi-problem family (one with a member under psychiatric treatment; non-verbal or very difficult to understand parents; or one parent participating unwillingly). All of these people, however, can benefit from being in the audience, and may at some future time qualify for the centre interview. (2) to obtain the names and ages of the children, to ask parents the nature of their child rearing difficulties that led them to volunteer, and to assure them that only the topics they bring up will be dealt with in the centre.

OPEN-CENTRE

In the "open-centre", from 7:30 to 8:30, the counsellor interviewed families in the traditional Adlerian format; parents, then children, and finally, parents alone or with the children, following the playroom report (Dreikurs, Corsini, Lowe, Sonstegard, 1959). This took place on a 12" riser with the democratic principles hung as a backdrop (Dreikurs, 1964). Here, parents in the audience learned through observing the counselling process; asking questions only about the

family-in-focus; and identifying with that family. With the limited time it was necessary to keep the interview moving. Parents were encouraged when families returned for follow-up interviews reporting some measure of improvement and demonstrating change in attitude. After Christmas, a counsellor working in the school district was able to join the team and to become the co-counsellor in the centre.

Besides the family interviews, the centre featured a family meeting and review of basic concepts of Adlerian theory. A mother, who had begun family meetings following the panel presentation in April, demonstrated the weekly meeting with her daughters aged 4 and 7. The older children came from the playroom for this demonstration. Also, a few of the older children joined the parents each week in the audience and in small groups, where their participation was welcomed.

The theory sessions, consisting of a brief lecture, an experiential exercise and discussion, were especially important at the end of the first term as a means of review as well as at the beginning of the second term for the new registrants. Since the planning committee had opted for the group discussions of the School for Parents model rather than the study groups usually associated with the Family Education Centre model, they did not assume the instructor role in the groups. In addition to the theory sessions in the centre, the following alternate means of keeping the information in the forefront evolved:

- 1) Participants were asked to purchase and read the pamphlet "Basics of Practical Parenting".
- 2) Counsellor referred to principles throughout interviews.
- 3) Counsellor recommended chapters from *Children: The Challenge*, relevant to that evening's session, for the following week.
- 4) Leaders summarized and led discussions in the groups on those chapters.
- 5) Leaders suggested topics needing further explanation for the centre sessions.

One of the most encouraging sessions occurred when a scheduled family did not arrive. The counsellors held a brief interview with the five sets of parents who had been in focus since September. These parents told of new understandings of themselves and their children, more positive attitudes, and more effective ways of dealing with former problem situations.

SMALL GROUPS

From 8:45 to 9:45, five groups, averaging 12 members each, were led by two parents with staff members and counsellors participating as group members. Progress was evident among both participants and leaders. While parents shared

their growth in applying principles at home successfully, in beginning family meetings and in feeling more relaxed and confident about parenting, leaders also felt their confidence steadily growing as they put their new leadership skills into practice. As mentioned earlier, the only changes made from Yotam's guidelines for group discussions were the addition of reading assignments and responsibility for some theory by the counsellors in the centre. The implementation of a detailed agenda with suggested time limits helped the leaders to keep on track and to complete the task on time. This also facilitated room and coffee clean-up and picking children up from the playroom. In the second term the groups were reorganized to allow for two new groups.

THE PLAYROOM

The playroom with highly trained supervisors was an essential adjunct to a School for Parents. It enabled parents to attend and give children experiences with democratic principles while parents were learning to apply them at home. The playroom report in the centre which described sibling and peer interaction provided useful information for the parents and counsellor. Attendance in this playroom averaged from 12 to 28 youngsters ranging in age from 18 months to 13 years. Some secondary Community Recreation students also came to assist in the playroom for the first hour and joined a discussion group in the second hour. Increasing cooperation among the children was noted throughout the year.

FEEDBACK SESSION

This culminating activity brought the staff and group leaders together for half an hour. Each person gave a brief report about his/her group and suggestions were made for the following week's agenda. These recorded reports had reflected initial discouragement which faded when others also reported having similar experiences. This resulted in such changes as the detailed agenda. More significant, was the increasing enthusiasm and sharing of encouragement which were optimal at that time.

SUMMARY

It is believed that this parent education model is well-suited for schools in which staff members are committed to democratic principles. The staff in this study reported such benefits as:

- 1) more rapport and relaxed communication in parent interviews,
- 2) saving of time during interviews due to parents' background knowledge and understanding,
- 3) children more settled and confident with the consistency at home,
- 4) more feeling of partnership with parents,
- 5) a positive influence on other Discovery parents and the community,
- 6) a noticeable growth in older students who attended the centre sessions,
- 7) the School for Parents serving as an extension and reinforcement of what happens in school.

The importance of the staff contribution to this project cannot be overemphasized. Its leadership, ongoing organizational work and willingness to devote time emulated Adler's *gemeinschaftsgefühl* or social interest, which he contended was a requisite for teachers because it enabled them to foster their students' self-confidence and social interest. Such were the prime aims of this model (Ansbacher, 1969).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND COUNSELLOR TRAINING

Since school is a common experience for all children, parent education could be a similar experience for parents. When parents are impressed with their role of prime educators (a partnership with teachers) they begin to realize the importance of their task for which they have had no specific training. With the possible variations of the Democratic Education Model which is also closely related to school discipline, responsibility, achievement and cooperation, parents learn both principles for understanding their own and their children's behaviour and techniques for enhancing their mutual self-esteem and social interest (Paresa, 1977). Encouraged parents can raise confident, capable children, while discouraged parents further discourage and often damage their children physically, mentally and emotionally. Since the school has the professional responsibility of encouraging every student, it is also the logical location to provide encouragement for those parents. There are other parenting programs given through the media and community agencies which are recommended by the Federal Subcommittee on Childhood (e.g., Experiences as Causes of Criminal Behaviour, Proceedings of the Subcommittee, Issue No. 9). Such programs can complement a universal preventive approach to the social concerns of society and the educational concerns within our schools.

The cost of school based parent education is minimal if counsellors are trained to provide this service (Christensen 1969; Lowe, 1974). Likewise, teacher training and in-service programs should give more focus to working with parents. Where teachers value and encourage parenting programs, parents respond to their partners in education (400 parents participated in parent study groups in Edmonton Separate Schools in 1977-78).

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