

PRESIDENT'S OPENING REMARKS

1964 CONFERENCE

Attending a triennial conference of the Australian Pre-School Association is an experience quite unlike that offered by an annual meeting of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union, although, for me on this occasion, it did provide the same pleasurable opportunity to renew friendships I had made at the last conference in Hobart.

The Australian meeting was a gathering of over 600, not predominantly those involved in administering pre-school centres, but more particularly those professionally engaged - pre-school advisers, kindergarten teachers, day care centre supervisors and students training for work in these fields. It is a week of concentrated enquiry, report and discussion on the principles and practice of early childhood education, based on a selected theme, in this case "The Enrichment of Childhood". The occasion is used for the Annual Meeting of the Association but this occupies only one brief morning session.

What is the A. P. A. and what are its functions? Although I gave some details of this after attending the conference in Hobart I think it bears repetition for the sake of new delegates and in the hope that we shall be encouraged to move towards the same objective in New Zealand. Founded in 1938 the A. P. A. is the national body comprising all the voluntary organisations in Australia and the Territory of Papua and New Guinea who have as their main concern the welfare and education of pre-school age children - Kindergarten Unions, Day Nursery Associations and church free kindergartens. Its work is:

- a. to administer the six Lady Gowrie Child Centres (one in each State) on behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Health; (These function in the same way as does the Helen Deem Educational Centre in Dunedin).
- b. to co-ordinate the work of voluntary pre-school organisations, set standards and be a clearing house for ideas;
- c. to act as a consultant, when requested, to Commonwealth Departments on matters concerning the care of young children.

It meets annually in Executive with delegates appointed by members in all States and Territories, College Principals and pre-school supervisors attached to Federal and State Government Departments. It organises triennially an A. P. A. Conference, links Australia with international organisations and supplies information and exhibits of Australian pre-school education abroad, when requested.

The work of the Association is carried out by a Federal Officer and a General Secretary, whose office is in Canberra. A grant from the Commonwealth Government meets the salary and travelling expenses of the Federal Officer, while funds for the Association's work come from fees of members, profits from publications and donations from interested citizens.

Each State is host for the Conference in turn, which involves planning on a grand scale, but as a turn comes only once in 21 years, it is unlikely that many would be caught up in the effort more than once. This was the first occasion for Queensland and it may well be proud of its success. It was blessed with magnificent weather, warm sunny days with a maximum temperature of about 72 degrees and clear crisp nights, with magnificent co-operation from the University and celebrated guest speakers. The Conference was held at the University of Queensland in the Student Union block. This University is situated in the fashionable suburb of St Lucia, about five miles from the centre of the city. The magnificent site of 360 acres sloping to the banks of the Brisbane River, was a gift to the State from a Dr Main and his sister, together with a cash donation of £60,000. Not all the buildings in the final plan are completed and additions are already being made to the main block, but it was worth the whole trip to have the opportunity to inspect and use this wonderful educational centre, its halls of residence and student amenities. I could not help thinking that those who pressed for the development of the University of Auckland on its present restricted site of 47 acres should have first looked at

Queensland before they rejected a similar prospect at Tamaki.

The official opening, by the Governor of Queensland, Sir Henry Abel-Smith, was also the occasion of the opening address by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Sir Fred Schonell, whose name will be familiar to all who are or have been teachers, and whose late wife was a devoted worker for spastic children. He took as his theme "The Importance of Pre-School Education". He stressed that children were not machines, but distinct individuals whose mental needs require as much attention as their physical demands. Understanding of this point would help to clear up many misconceptions about pre-school education, which is no new innovation and something that exists for all children, dull or clever. Sir Fred said that in Queensland it had been found that even for sub-normal children some kind of elementary experience had beneficial results and that for normal children it made a wonderful contribution to their mental development. Gone were the days when it was believed that children could not reason, when they were employed in factories and mines. "We have now realised the paramount importance of love in the development of the personality of the child, that all children are not ready for formal learning at the same time and that an important psychological need is play. This is where the pre-school centre can meet the need in full measure. If all children between the age of three and five had pre-school experience they would go to school with less confusion in their minds of what it is all about. They would have had a chance to work and play in an ordered framework with some rules and regulations and to develop some initiative. Plenty of play with others builds up security, confidence and independence."

Sir Fred concluded his address by saying that all who work in the interests of young children must enter into that spirit of understanding shown by our Master whose advice to His disciples was "Freely ye have received, freely give".

As this was an Australian conference, quite naturally, development of the theme "The Enrichment of Childhood" centred on Australia's needs and problems, but much could apply equally well to New Zealand. There were four lectures on "A Child's Heritage". Professor Rendle-Short, Professor of Child Health at the University of Queensland, opened the discussion with his lecture on "A Child's Heritage in Western Culture". "What do we mean by heritage?" he said. "It is a word that has gradually changed its meaning. Originally it meant a concept of physical characteristics or temperament inherited from parents. Later it meant money and goods - something pre-determined and something one could not help. Now it is generally believed to be something good." Dr Rendle-Short traced the changes that have occurred in children's lives, the tremendous advances in infant welfare, in the field of congenital abnormalities, the toll of accidents through children taking such poisons as kerosene, the increasing hazards from treatments e.g. thalidomide, X-rays and radiation. Doctors must face the problem of larger numbers of abnormal children. Facilities are being found for them and education is being provided.

On the emotional side the most important change had been in discipline in the home. Love and security have never been lacking and education was given - in some ways better education than today - but the child was to be seen and not heard. Towards the middle of this century the pendulum had swung towards giving the child complete freedom, now these extreme views have been modified. Freedom and discipline must go hand in hand. Basically what is required is a Christian heritage, a loving home in which parents believe and trust in Christ himself.

Following this lecture we were shown a film "Four Families", illustrating the methods used by an Indian, Japanese, French and Canadian family in handling an infant child. For parent meetings in kindergartens this would provide an excellent programme and provoke discussion.

Professor A. A. Abbie, Professor of Anatomy, University of Adelaide, spoke on "A Child's Heritage in an Aboriginal Family". Much of his lecture could apply to our Maori people, although the Australian aboriginal has not reached the same stage of development. Professor Abbie

phoed what was said many times during this conference, that the most important heritage for a child is his own family. In an aboriginal family this was often pretty dismal. He traced the stages of development - adoption of clothes, better food, abandonment of nomadic life, but tendency to go walkabout at any time, earning and spending money, certain degree of toleration of white man's interference, acceptance of a certain amount of instruction in religion and hygiene. The most important thing is that some of the children are taken to school where they are bathed, dressed and fed. Although there is no obvious effect on parents a surprising number of children get beyond this stage and pass on to the next, where they become sub-standard town dwellers and their children get better education.

The ways to improve the lot of the aboriginal are first to get the men on our side and to give them a voice in government. They are the ones who decide things in the home. Secondly the women. Black or white, they are the key to the home. Many white women have no confidence in running a home but black women are simply terrified by it. The transition from their reserves to normal homes should be a gradual progression through homes at different levels or to build model homes where they can be trained by welfare officers in the use of domestic facilities. Thirdly the children - we cannot hope to make any spectacular progress with the children until we have coped with their parents. In South Australia education of the children comes under the Department of Education. What comes before formal schooling is the worry, for sometimes children do not reach school until the age of ten or twelve and are then very humiliated by the experience. There is no competition in the aboriginal home and when he has to face it in school the child is helpless, becomes discouraged and won't work. He gets no home encouragement, leaves school at fifteen with mediocre results. To overcome this lack of parental co-operation, poor home environment and retarded entry to school it is hoped to send pre-school teachers out into the field, to work with the very young children and to get the mothers into the sessions. One thing it is hoped to achieve is to have trained aboriginal girls. On one settlement where there is pre-school training there is no handicap suffered by the children when they go on to school. (I am sure you will see the similarity here between what is being done for the aboriginal and what the Maori Education Foundation is providing for young Maori children. The significant difference is the emphasis on a trained teacher in charge.) Professor Abbie believes it is important that, initially, the teaching of the child should be done in the language he habitually uses in his home, that he makes much better progress later than he would if he were taught in English from the outset. Professor Lindberg supported this view. This thought seems contrary to what we are trying to achieve for the Maori, familiarity with English before he goes to school.

Professor Abbie considers that the final goal is assimilation of the aboriginal into Australian life, not absorption, and that he should be given every opportunity to preserve his own culture and to take his place in society in skilled trades and professions.

We were shown a most interesting film taken at Alice Springs and Darwin, depicting aboriginals having their first contact with white men and showing them many of their skills and ancient customs. Among the teachers attending the conference was an aboriginal girl who had the same physical characteristics as those we saw in the film - long thin straight legs, no hips and fuzzy hair. She is a trained kindergarten teacher - among the first to enter the profession.

Professor Lucile Lindberg, Professor of Education at Queen's College of the City University of New York, who was Guest Lecturer, spoke of "A Child's Heritage in Countries Visited". She was one of a team of American educationists who recently made a tour of Africa and she has travelled widely in other countries. In Africa, she said, one becomes very aware of the importance of education. There are thousands living in mud huts and not a soul can read or write, but fathers say, "Some day my child will have an education." The people in developing countries are seeking literacy, but their great need is teachers.

I was not the only person at this Conference who felt that

Professor Lindberg suffered by comparison with the Australian speakers. She has a vivid personality and good looks and is a first-class actress - and, as I later discovered when I attended her discussion session, she is a gifted teacher - but in her lectures she relied too much on analogy and on what Americans term 'homespun wisdom.' Her message to the Conference, and it was important, which was reiterated by others many times, was the importance of the teacher in a child's life, a qualified person who can really help boys and girls to become aware of their heritage. "One teacher", she said, "in one year can make such a difference in the life of a child that he will never be the same again."

In a later lecture entitled "Preparing the Teacher" she made some telling points. "Some of the most old-fashioned teachers I know", she said, "graduated from College last year". "Any teacher worth her salt is going to spend the rest of her life getting prepared. I do not think we teachers should ever apologise for the amount of training or lack of training we have. We should apologise if we have stopped our preparation". "The training and the background of the teacher and the salary go hand in hand and they have got to be raised at the same time. People make the mistake of lowering the requirements and the minute we do that we get an influx to help us over the emergency. We have found that every time you raise the standard you get more people and more of the kind you want. There is not a State in the United States where you can teach in the public schools if you do not have a degree".

Dr D. G. Bettison, Executive Officer of the New Guinea Research Unit, Australian National University, spoke of "A Child's Heritage in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea". He said that children here are well cared for but the basic problem in the under-fives is lack of protein in the mother's milk after about eight months of age. The relationship of a child to its mother is very close and weaning is a particularly direct and serious matter at the age of about three, when his mother leaves him increasingly to his own devices because his weight and slowness of movement hinder her. Some tribes temporarily transfer the child to live in the men's houses, where he must acquire as much dexterity as his physical abilities allow and develop respect for the property of others.

School is a distinct innovation in village life and, although the discipline of attending is resented, education is sought after by adults as well as children. Dr Bettison said that within the next five or ten years all children will probably be at school, but certainly the whole country will be pacified by the end of this year. Professional classes have emerged as teachers and nurses but the great need is to enrich the training of those who have already passed out of training institutions. This applies to pre-school training as well as any other. A native trained kindergarten teacher attended this Conference and others have trained or are training at the college in Brisbane. Dr Bettison showed coloured slides of pre-school centres in Papua and New Guinea and comments were made concerning them by the pre-school officers for the Territory.

These four lectures on "A Child's Heritage" clearly demonstrated that a child's life is made or marred first by the quality of his home and the attitude of his parents and later by the quality of his teachers, regardless of his race and colour.

Two professional contributions to the conference were given by Miss Jean Adamson, Director of the Lady Gowrie Centre in Melbourne and Miss Margaret Roberts, lecturer in Child Development at the Teachers' College in Hobart and former Principal of the Kindergarten Teachers' College in Adelaide. Miss Adamson spoke on "Planning the Programme for Kindergarten Experience" and Miss Roberts on "Some Aspects of Piaget's Work in relation to the First Stage in Education". Unfortunately, both read their lectures at high speed and again unfortunately, both crammed too much into the time allotted, which made it almost impossible to take notes. For the professional people present these lectures were undoubtedly the highlight of the conference but full value from them will come only when the text is available for quiet study in the verbatim report.

One of the most provocative lectures was given by Dr F. W. Clements of the Institute of Child Health in the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine at the University of Sydney, when he spoke on the "Programmes and Problems of Children needing Day Care". What he had to say aroused some indignation in the minds of those involved in this work and those with nursing training. Dr Clements used John Bowlby's description of the needs of young children for the purpose of developing his theme. These are sucking, crying, smiling, following and clinging, needs that are unique to the human race which must be met for survival. He dealt with each in turn to emphasise that a mother who is emotionally secure and adequately supported by her husband is able to meet these needs and develop a satisfying relationship with her child. But if the child is admitted to a day care centre are those in charge, even though they may be fully aware of the child's needs, able to meet them. Do they not rather give custodial care because they have not the time to provide the close physical contact so necessary for a child under two. Although nurses are employed in day care centres Dr Clements was not sure that they were the right persons for the whole task. What he felt was also required was a group of helpers who did not mind children climbing over them. For the older children the kindergarten programme is designed to provide opportunities for play but for children under two the need is for human relationships and human contacts. The infant is much more interested in the person at the end of the rattle than in the rattle itself.

Following Dr Clements' lecture we visited "Kinderkraft" the citizens' day nursery which is on the roof of the City Hall in Brisbane. Here a course of training is offered and a very useful service is provided for those in need of it.

The final lecture, before the week was summed up by Professor Lindberg, was given by a psychologist, Dr J. W. Staines of the Newcastle University College. His subject was "The Unexpectedness of Learning". Dr Staines believes that we should listen more carefully to children to identify their types, and to become aware of their significant aspects. Personality can be changed early where it cannot be changed later. Submissive children can be made assertive. What do you do to a child when you say "You are wrong". "You are no good at English". You should say "Your English is not as good as your arithmetic" and the child will live up to the picture of himself that you give him. Kindergarten teachers who have the knowledge and skill to understand the children under their care can make a big contribution to the onerous task of bringing them up.

Besides the lectures planned for this week there were discussion sessions and participation groups, visits to pre-school centres and the Brisbane Lady Gowrie Centre where we saw a very fine example of what can be done in playground planning to provide opportunities for adventurous play. It certainly was a very busy week. In their desire to make this a full and rich conference the Queensland people went, perhaps, too far and left little time for leisurely contacts among those who attended, but all would agree with the President of the A. P. A. who, in her final summing up said, "One thing that has struck me very favourably is that the importance and significance of the work we are engaged in is so universally accepted. Here is a challenge if there ever was one."

I am most grateful to all who made it possible for me to attend this conference, to increase my knowledge and to share the experience with you. I look forward to the day when in New Zealand we can organise something comparable, for I know that Australians would flock to attend. If we are to do this, or even if we are not, we must lose no time in raising our sights beyond some of the petty things that occupy our thoughts and in counting our blessings. In Queensland, kindergartens are not free. "I like the sound of that word 'free'", said their President, Mrs Thomson. Parents must pay as much as £6.6s per term for their child's attendance, as well as give support for raising at least £300 each year. The Queensland Government has recently given £50,000 towards the cost of a new kindergarten teachers' college. I say 'towards' because the Creche and Kindergarten Association must also find £50,000 to meet the full cost of the project. This challenge has been calmly but enthusiastically accepted, with no doubts about its achievement. I wonder how we would

react in similar circumstances. In this 75th year of our movement let us resolve to be more worthy of our heritage and to move forward to greater understanding and knowledge of the importance of pre-school education.