

Lil Gwyther
Please return

CURRICULUM

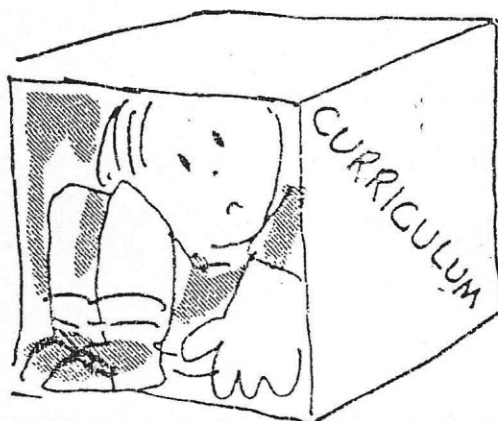
It's cramping my style

by

Lil Gwyther

and

Noelene McBride



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This paper is presented on behalf of the Early Education Reform Group (EERG) by myself, Lil Gwyther, its foundation president and public relations officer and Noelene McBride, a member of EERG and a lecturer in early childhood education at QUT Carseldine. Its purpose is to plead the case of young children within the education system and to support our assertions and recommendations with current research related to child growth and development.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the existing educational paradigm and its frailties, in terms of providing children with opportunities for optimal growth and development - physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually. This argument is sustained through reference to current theory and practice and clearly identifies the need for application of this theory to classroom practice.

The second section outlines what we see as the '**new paradigm**'. It suggests alternatives to educational practice which are not optional but **essential** to ensure that every child reaches her or his potential.

SECTION 1

'Even if we grant that mental growth is rapid during the early years of life, it does not follow as dawn follows the night, that this calls for formal, teacher-directed learning. During periods of rapid mental growth, children seek out the stimuli to nourish themselves mentally. WE SERVE THEM BEST BY PROVIDING AN ENVIRONMENT RICH IN MATERIALS TO OBSERVE, EXPLORE, MANIPULATE, TALK, WRITE AND THINK ABOUT. YOU DO NOT PRUNE DURING THE GROWING SEASON.'

(Elkind, D. 1987, *Young Children*)

We need to throw out the old ways which still largely dominate in Queensland early education. It is imperative that we move to a more flexible, child-centred system. The present emphasis on channelling growing-up through a set curriculum discourages and wastes many of the talents and energies of children.

There is on-going debate amongst educationalists about what to teach and how to teach it. One of the loudest voices is that which supports a set body of knowledge being forced to children to prepare them for the 'real world'. One suspects that this 'Back to Basics' voice comes mainly from the business and industry world, pressuring that children be trained from the beginning so as to be ready for their working lives. (Doubtless that view was what caused a university lecturer years ago to liken education in Queensland to 'stuffing a chook'!) There is plenty of research to support that view, of course, but fortunately there is also much research which leads to very different conclusions.

After 50 years of teaching, observing and studying children in the early years of schooling, I have learned to read available research evidence, and then marry what seems to fit with my carefully assessed practical experience. I have come to the very firm conclusion that the present system has done grave disservice to many thousands of children. For many it has meant complete alienation from the joys of learning. Kindergarten children can't get in the door fast enough, but how many of those children a few years later are knocking the school door down in the morning?

There are many children, of course, who apparently defeat the system and appear very successful. I am convinced, however, that because of the grind to acquire a certain body of knowledge and facts, an enormous amount of creativity and leadership potential has been stifled in those children - their wings have been clipped.

Even in our more enlightened schools we still find young children being subjected to daily 'teaching'. They would learn more happily, with much greater efficiency and more lasting results if we simply encouraged them to learn through their own interests and efforts. Put them in an environment rich in the things which genuinely interest children, provide some **specially trained adults** with whom they can interact and look to for help if required, and watch the difference.

We long for the day when the main concern of the primary school is to guard children's right to grow in freedom, experiencing success all along the way, and revelling in the joys which **true** learning brings.

What is wrong with the present education system and why we believe this is so?

1. THE PRESENT SYSTEM IS, IN THE MAIN, INFLEXIBLY AGE-GRADED AND LOCK-STEP.

Children are allowed to enter Year 1 as long as they have turned 5 by the end of the previous December. This means that entering Year 1 children range in chronological terms from 5 to almost 6 years of age. The great majority of them will move on to a Year 2 class at the end of one year and subsequently to Year 3 etc. (Traditionally the Education Department has frowned upon the repetition of a grade and very few children do repeat.)

This arrangement takes no notice of what is now well known and recognised about the development of young children. Differences in the rates at which children develop are enormous - some children develop skills earlier while others are much later than the average. This means that while there is a one year chronological age range over a single grade, conservative estimates put the range in developmental terms at between 3.5 and 7.5 years. This fact in itself makes a nonsense of expecting 25 Year 1 children to cover the same amount of work in Year 1. In our opinion this situation is one of the major causes of the so called 'learning difficulties' which are diagnosed through the ensuing primary years and beyond. The unceasing call for more remedial teachers is the direct result. It is time we all recognised that what can be effected by remediation could have been taught in the first place if the time were right, with considerably less damage to children's self-esteem.

The notion of the distinctiveness of early childhood is central to this argument and encompasses the theory base related to how young children develop and learn. Brain studies (Brierley 1987) demonstrate the young brain's potential, flexibility and resilience and highlight the crucial importance of the preschool and early school years. The crucial nature of these early years of learning and education must be understood in terms of current research including such areas as biology (George 1988, Brierley 1987) neurology and physiology (Bairstow & Laszlo 1978, 1987, O'Brien 1988) and psychology (Piaget 1950, 1972, Erikson 1950, Elkind 1986, 1989, Kamii 1985, Donaldson 1986, Grieve & Pratt 1987) and the imperatives that are suggested therein. There is an interdependence of theoretical and applied work and it is essential to the education of the child that there is co-operation between research and educational and clinical workers.

Children develop at their own rates and through their own interests.



2. THE PRESENT SYSTEM IS STILL LARGELY CURRICULUM-CENTRED RATHER THAN CHILD-CENTRED.

Theory and research consistently agree that young children learn differently from older children and adults. Insufficient credence is given to the widely varying ways in which individual children learn best. Very little notice is taken of the different interests of individual children. By using children's ideas as a starting point, the learning that could follow would be both enjoyable and worthwhile: 'A CHILD FOCUSING HIS ATTENTION ON SOMETHING THAT TAKES HIS INTEREST LEARNS' (Brierley 1987).

Everything is new to young children and they learn best by direct hands-on contact with their world - observing, exploring, manipulating and trying things out. Formal instruction in specific areas - reading, writing, maths - puts excessive demands on young children. It is at variance with their natural ways of learning. Stress occurs with many children and may grow worse as the months and years pass by. We see fatigue, irritability, frustration, confusion, headaches and stomach aches. Aggressive behaviour often occurs and, what is worse, some children withdraw completely. Confidence is lost and school becomes a place to fear - the only good part, I have often been told, is playing with their mates at lunchtime.

'True, or living learning, originates from the child, and indeed directly from some of his stronger interests and drives.'

(Isaacs)

This brief story reinforces the importance of a child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

In the 1930s psychologist Myrtle McGraw (1935) carried out what has become a classic study of the contributions of nature and nurture to motor development. McGraw's study involved twin boys, Johnny and Jimmy. She trained one of the twins, Johnny, in a variety of motor tasks such as climbing and riding a tricycle. Jimmy was not trained, and Johnny soon surpassed him in these skills. On the other hand, after the training was discontinued, Jimmy quickly caught up with his brother, so that by the end of the year in which the training took place there was no difference in motor skills between the twins. In motor learning, maturation appeared to be at least as important as training.

What the psychiatrist told me, however, was that he had seen the twins several years after the investigation was complete. When he examined the two boys, he found a striking difference in their personalities and particularly their approach to learning. Johnny, the twin who had been trained, was diffident and insecure. He seemed always to be looking for adult direction and approval of his activities. Jimmy, the untrained twin, was quite the opposite. Self-confident and self-assured, he undertook activities on his own without looking to the adults in the situation for guidance and direction. Although this example is anecdotal, it does suggest the potential risk of too much adult intervention in the self-directed learning of young children (Elkind 1987, p. 113).

3. THE OVERRIDING IMPORTANCE OF THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN GOES LARGELY UNRECOGNISED IN A GREAT MANY SCHOOLS.

Children's self-esteem development is a learning process largely influenced by the appraisal of adults. This makes teachers a crucial factor in the self-esteem development of young pupils. They greatly influence children's sense of self-competence in relation to school tasks. Children's ill-health and behaviour problems may relate to anxieties about how they are performing as compared with other children. Many problems have been found to relate to lack of satisfactory self-concept - lying, cheating, stealing, headaches, nightmares. The list is endless.

In many cases confidence is lost to such a degree that all joy of learning is lost, 'learning problems' appear, and in many instances 'school failure' is the end result.

How you perceive yourself determines what you think you are able to do and that determines in turn what you will try. So the SELF-CONCEPT has a tremendous effect upon the intelligence of the individual.

The danger of early instruction from a socialisation point of view, then, is that it can make children overly dependent upon others for their sense of self-worth. Sound early childhood education encourages children to feel good about themselves as a consequence of their own achievements (Elkind 1987).

Elkind also suggests that:

'It is the cumulative effect that is central and it is often only in adolescence that the long term effects often can be seen. Self-esteem is not constant. It alters in relation to the environment'.

There is a clear link between cognition and social adjustment. Lack of social adjustment and poor self esteem have an adverse effect on intellectual potential. This link is termed 'social cognition'.



4. THE COMPULSORY AGE OF ENTRY IS STATED IN THE EDUCATION ACT AS 'NOT BEFORE 6'. THIS MEANS THAT CHILDREN MAY LEGALLY WAIT TO ENTER YEAR 1 UNTIL THEY ARE ANYWHERE BETWEEN 6 AND 7 YEARS OF AGE.

In reality, because of present age concessions, the majority enter between 5 and 6 years. A great number of these children are not developmentally ready for what school requires of them. They would have a much better chance of managing comfortably if they were at least a year older.

There is a potential risk of too much adult intervention in the self-directed learning of young children.

Early instruction also puts the child at intellectual risk. Jean Piaget (1950) emphasized the importance of what he called 'reflective abstraction' for the mental ability of the child. A child who is engaging in self-directed learning can reflectively abstract from those activities (Donaldson 1986).

When adults intrude upon the child's learning, they interfere with this process of reflective abstraction. What characterises formal instruction is that it 'presents the child with contents to be learned' (Cullen 1987).

'By year one, the teachers control over the children's learning (is) clearly apparent as the children daily proceeded through a sequence of direct teaching sessions and independent seatwork with little time available for free-choice activities even when these were available in classrooms' (Cullen, 1987, p. 10.).

Cullen's research gives many examples of the effects of adult intervention of children's thinking and learning. One example relates to reflective language and the P-1 transition and relates to the case study of Thomas.

Preschool

*'I use my imagination
... to help me think',
talking to observer
about collage.*

Year 1

*'I can remember 'cos the
teacher explains it to
us', talking to observer
about worksheet.*

(Cullen 1987, p. 16)

Interference at this stage creates dependent rather than independent learners and thinkers.

5. CLASSES ARE TOO LARGE TO ALLOW FOR INDIVIDUALISED LEARNING, MADE WORSE BY THE LACK OF ASSISTANCE FOR THE TEACHERS IN THE FORM OF FULL-TIME PAID AIDES.

The wide variation in levels of development within a class, coupled with the differing learning styles best suited to individual children, make individualised learning at certain times an absolute necessity. A teacher must be free to interact with children in a one-to-one basis when it is beneficial to do so, and without the constant help of another adult, this becomes extremely difficult.

A classroom environment which encourages children to talk about his/her learning experiences provides many opportunities for young learners to practise and refine reflective skills.

Learning centres and other co-operative group activities encourage 'peer collaboration' that is, a mutual task on which a child 'uses speech to guide the actions of her or his partner and, in turn, to be guided by the partner's speech' (Forman & Cazden 1985, p.343). Cullen (1987, p.11) goes on to say that 5 and 6 year olds may be observed apparently talking to themselves as they work on a task. This 'private speech' is a form of verbal self instruction, which during the school years becomes internal thought (Berk 1985) a crucial element in contextualising experiences and increasing the child's awareness of the cognitive processes which assist learning (Donaldson 1986).

An interactive teaching style is another important issue. Cullen's research further expands on this when she describes the classrooms. Informal teacher-child interactions in the form of prompts, questions, comments and suggestions were one of the main techniques used by teachers and aides to encourage pre-primary children to extend or complete an activity. In Year 1 classrooms, however, teacher interactions tended to be restricted to controlling comments or correcting assigned work at the end of a lesson (Cullen 1987).

6. **THERE IS A LACK OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS REQUIRING IT**

A number of studies have examined the nature of the problems experienced by different cohorts of beginning teachers (Otto, Gasson & Jordan 1979, Tefler 1982, 1985). Tisher (1979) found that many of the induction programs that exist tended to focus on administrative matters and orientation to the school. Little support appeared to be provided for the professional development of new appointees. Young (1979) highlighted the importance of planned induction schemes that supported beginning teachers and gave them adequate time to adjust.

Bartlett (1978) argued for a more participatory approach between employer and beginning teacher with regard to school placements while Auzins (1979) maintained that it was not enough for school administrators to have good intentions towards beginning teachers. In Auzin's view there was a need for schools to have a written policy outlining the structures and processes that supported these intentions.

7. **THERE IS A LACK OF SUITABLE HANDS-ON EQUIPMENT SUCH AS IS SUPPLIED IN PRESCHOOLS.**

8. **CLASSROOMS ARE TOO SMALL** to, allow the freedom of movement so necessary to children at an intensely physically-active stage of development.

Many rooms have a great dearth of manipulative equipment - jig-saws, suitable painting equipment, large easels and paper, and other art supplies, blocks, water-play, sand-play, dramatic play, puppet theatres, etc. Given access to such material, children will discover, manipulate, plan, question, and practise those things which constitute the very basis of joyful, meaningful learning. This is a natural process.

'Parents should not hurry their children into working at things remote from their immediate interests. Let them first attain the strength that comes from dealing efficiently with matters near at hand . . . By anticipating the ordinary course, they diminish the powers of their children, and disturb profoundly the equilibrium of their nature. This is what happens when teachers hurry children into lessons that are concerned chiefly with words, before they have passed through the discipline of actual encounter with real things . . .'

(Pestolozzi)

The importance of this lack of equipment may be that it affects the availability for free play. This is of real concern because as Brierley (1987) suggests:

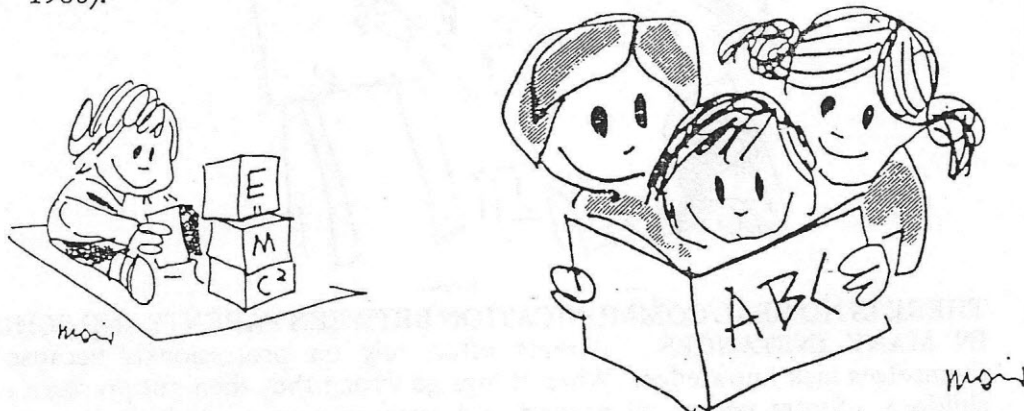
'All forms of play appear to be essential for the intellectual, imaginative and emotional development of the child and may well be necessary steps to a further stage of development.'

Lack of space and a restricted environment may inhibit the full development of the child. The activity of the motor system is initiated and controlled through its sensory connections, indeed the motor system is 'blind' without the information provided by its sensory input.

In these early years a child revels in using his developing motor skills. It is a time when children explore tirelessly . . . it is also a stage when children invent and create with ease and confidence not only in their involvement but in drama, painting in the interpretation of stories and rhyme, singing games and so on. All these activities develop gross and fine motor control but an eye needs to be kept on planning opportunities for improving both. Good use needs to be made of a school site: steps, bushes, trees and permanent large scale play equipment. In addition, for older children

in the infant school, large and small apparatus, work with balls, moving to music, swimming, will help continue the development of these motor skills and bodily and spatial awareness. The developing motor intelligence should not be blunted by too early an introduction to specific skills and techniques or over-practising skills which at this stage impair imagination and the readiness to explore.

During these years of swift brain growth a child's eyes, ears and touch sense in particular are absorbing experiences of all kinds through imitation and exploration. It is obvious that the quality of experience is vital for sound development. In addition to sensory experience, talk is as vital to human life as pure air (Brierley 1987, Donaldson 1986).



9. **MANY TEACHERS LACK INDEPTH KNOWLEDGE OF CHILDREN'S GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.** Because of this they are unaware of the damage done to children if they are expected to perform tasks far in advance of their present capabilities. Children become stressed, teachers become harassed and parents become anxious. All in all, a ridiculous situation. Add to this the lack of awareness of the importance of nurturing the social and emotional development of the child, we see much harm done unintentionally by many teachers. Even a teacher's 'body language' can produce fear in a small child!

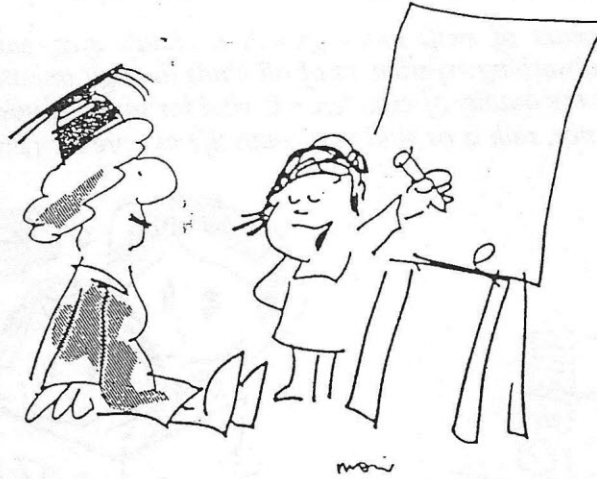
Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*, referring to a teacher:

'Indeed, as he eagerly sparkled at them, he seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge. He seemed a galvanising apparatus, too, charged with a given mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away.'

Early Childhood is a multidisciplinary area which interacts with biology, neurology, physiology and psychology via the child and his individual differences and needs. It has been established that early childhood teachers need an indepth background in the understanding of the cultural context of the child (Elkind 1989, Katz 1989) as well as an understanding of the developmental stages of young children physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually and academically. In order to develop children to their fullest potential, teachers need to understand the combined effect of all the above factors (Donaldson 1986, Blenkin & Kelly 1989).

David George (1987) contends that exploration is an important biological drive and begins very early. Exploration is no more than the application by a child of the scientific method of the environment. A child learns the nature of things by experience, he draws his conclusions, then he tests them. This building up knowledge through trial and error is the basis of all later intellectual activity. Security, the right amount of intervention by adults and an environment that invites exploration and allows it to progress stage by stage, will help exploratory learning to flourish. Exploration may feed the brain and physically enhance it. Arousing and stimulating interest through exploration may increase inventiveness in later life.

Young children are the future. Those that care for them and educate them have a responsibility to ensure that they are developed to their fullest potential. In order to do this educators must have the fullest possible knowledge and understanding of children's growth and development, to ensure that education in the full sense is not just about learning in the sense of acquisition of knowledge, but is rather about human development which properly planned learning can promote' (Blenkin & Kelly 1989).



10. **THERE IS NO REAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS IN MANY INSTANCES.** Parents often rely on professionals because they themselves lack knowledge. When things go wrong they then put pressure on the children. Stress occurs all around and because parents and teachers are not partners, most situations deteriorate, with little hope of solution.

CONCLUSION

George Bernard Shaw stated that:

'Pressing people to learn things they don't want to know is as unwholesome and disastrous as feeding them on sawdust'.

The foregoing descriptions of damage to motivation, intellectual growth, and self-esteem are potential risks that are not always realised in every child who is miseducated. But why put the child at risk in the first place? There is really no evidence that early formal instruction has any lasting or permanent benefits to the youngster's emerging personality.

It is reasonable to conclude, then, that the early instruction of young children derives more from adult needs and priorities than it does from what we know is good pedagogy for young children (Elkind 1987, p113).

SECTION 2

The New Paradigm

The new paradigm reflects the premises on which EERG philosophy is based.

- * That young children learn best when they have rich experience with concrete objects and situations.
- * That processes of thinking are action-based, not based on verbal repetition.
- * That when experiences and materials match the level of thinking of the child, and there is a link to previous experience, the child will learn easily and with interest.
- * That if we concentrate on what a child can do, and build on that, we are likely to have his co-operation, confidence, and active involvement in his own learning.
- * That if we provide a rich stimulating environment, the child will discover, manipulate, plan, question, and practise those things which are important for him to pay attention to. This is a natural process.
- * That a child's social and emotional growth should be catered for as well as his intellectual growth. He should be able to talk, work and share with other children, and have opportunities to talk to the teacher one to one. This is all a very important part of a child's growth and contributes widely to natural learning.

IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT CURRICULUM DIRECTIONS FOR THE 1990S REFLECT THE FOLLOWING UNDERSTANDINGS:

- * Children in these early years need a warm, caring environment, with a teacher capable of providing the same sense of security as does a good home.
- * The first four years of primary school should be ungraded. Vertical grouping will cater for children with an approximate age range from 5-8 years, either with one teacher, or in a team-teaching situation.
- * These teachers will understand the necessity to see the learner as the centre of the program, and also as the active member. The child's interests will be the focal point for learning.
- * The teachers will be aware of the children's future needs as members of a society undergoing continuous change - the abilities to choose wisely, to make decisions and to solve problems will be of paramount importance.
- * By giving the child opportunities for choice, we will be preparing him for the decision making which will face him in adult life. So-called 'work' will emerge from the child's 'play'. Play will be the beginnings of reading, maths, etc. For example, blocks are an important resource in the underpinning of social studies language development, creative writing, science and maths.

Perhaps a generation of educators will have to move on before play is recognised for what it is - an absolutely essential element in the development of thought (Davie 1971).

- * The communication between child/child and child/teacher will be encouraged.

Verbal explanation, in advance of understanding based on experience, may be an obstacle to learning, and children's knowledge of the right words may conceal from teachers their lack of understanding. Discussion with other children and with adults is one of the principal ways in which children check their concepts against those of others and build up an objective view of reality.

- * Competition and testing will be eliminated. (Screening for neurological impairment will be effected before school entry.) Attitudes, creativity and other important aspects of growth cannot be assessed academically. Working individually with children, a teacher will be aware of strengths and weaknesses, and use the one to build up the other. Fostering a love of learning is more important than a measured result.
- * The playground is of the greatest value in the learning process. Equipment will cater for the younger children and also be capable of ongoing challenge as children grow. For example, a scramble net reaching first the lower branches of a tree, and then going higher. Children's confidence gets a terrific boost when mastering physical challenge, and this confidence then spills over into the classroom.
- * The teacher will know when to step in, guide and extend a child in any chosen activity. Each child each day will succeed at something.

HOW WILL THIS HAPPEN?

In order that a program reflecting the values of the above can succeed there are pre-requisites which include:

1. Teachers of early years should all have had **specialist training** either pre-service or in-service, including an indepth course on child growth and development. High priority should be placed on social and emotional development above all other areas at this stage.
2. Effective **in-service** training in **child growth and development** should be available in school time to all inspectors, principals, administrators and teachers. While educationalists remain uninformed about the vital importance of these early years, damage will continue to be done to many young children with disastrous effects to later schooling.
3. Classes should be kept small, no more than 20, with a full time aide for each teacher. This is imperative if children are to be treated as individuals and given the maximum opportunity to grow and to learn happily. Small numbers are also necessary to facilitate interpersonal relationships between child and child; child and teacher - so important to the formation of a sound self-concept.
4. All equipment currently supplied to pre-school must be available to early primary classes. As new schools are built, space similar to that in preschool also must be provided. During the early years of swift brain growth children are capable of absorbing enormous amounts of knowledge through their eyes, ears and touch senses, and through all motor activity. We must provide a rich and varied environment for all these things to happen.
5. Help in the form of professional support must be available to teachers who require it. Teachers must have ample opportunity to observe in other schools.
6. Staff should be accorded **continuity** of service for at least four years unless proven unsuitable or requesting transfer. Education administrators should consider continuity of programs on an individual basis.

7. Development of real partnerships between **parent** and **teacher** so that they recognise that each has a role - different but equally vital - and that together they can achieve more than just twice as much! Children grow in security in feeling that these people, so important in their lives, are pulling together.
8. A massive public education campaign must be mounted by the Education Department via media, TV, radio and press to promote the awareness and understanding of children's development in relation to schooling. Unrealistic expectations of parents can be damaging.

At the heart of the educational process lies the child. No advances in policy, no acquisitions of new equipment have their desired effect unless they are in harmony with the nature of the child (Plowden Committee Report).

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