

Preschooling for Traveller Children in Galway

There are two particular things you may find in a traveller preschool that might not be so important in a settled class: lots of toy horses and a plentiful supply of blocks. Respecting the children's cultural background is one important factor in obtaining positive parental responses to early intervention.

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"Isn't that wonderful work you do! " "How can you possibly do it?"

These two remarks typify the types of responses elicited when you say you work in a preschool for traveller children. Like all shock reactions, both are far from the truth. The fact is that a preschool for travellers is neither better nor worse than one for settled children. It may, however, be different. You are never bored. You rarely have a quiet moment. You have days when you feel like screaming and walking out. But, there are times when all the aggravation is worthwhile. What is it really like? Like the children themselves, it is exasperating, it is volatile, but it can be fun.

History of the Project

Preschool education for travellers in Galway was initiated by the Itinerant Settlement committee in the 1970's. In the early days of the class the main aim was to take the children off the side of the road, bring them into the classroom, feed them, bathe them and give them toys to amuse themselves. The St. Vincent de Paul Society lent us a room in Ozanam House in the city centre and the first class began in April 1980.

At that time there was no strict policy on entry age. Very few traveller children attended school at all, so one might have six year olds and older who had no idea of what it was like to be restricted. Imagine a child who has had the freedom to roam around in the fields, coming indoors only for food and sleep, who is unfamiliar with toilets, or baths, and who may never have dealt with a "settled" person before. Put this child into a room with ten others, most of whom he doesn't know; give him toys and equipment the like of which he has never seen; expect him to sit down, at least for some of the time. What do you get? The best description would be a riot. I can remember boys who ran around and around the room all day long; another who refused to take his woolly cap off, even in the bath. One of my most vivid memories of all concerns a six year old girl who attempted to scale a 16 ft high gate to escape from the play yard! This was then the normal run of events in a day; one teacher and a voluntary helper trying to control ten or twelve wild children - children who threw the dinner on the floor or at the ceiling. For the first year or so, one did very little

teaching, most of the effort involved just calming the children down.

Things took a turn for the better when the visiting teacher was appointed at the end of 1980. Maugie Francis set about persuading the parents to send their children to Primary school and a firm policy was established for the preschool. From this time the children could come to preschool at the age of three but must progress to infant class at the normal school entry age. In 1981 the group housing scheme at Hillside Park was opened and a second preschool began there. This left Ozanam House free to cater for children on the west side of the city; those who had been in unauthorised camp sites or the east side were all housed at Hillside. Since then the two classes have been running and the children have been going straight into regular infant class. There have, of course, been a few exceptions where the child had either learning difficulties or behaviour problems.

In the beginning the parents had a very *laissez-faire* attitude towards schooling. If the child did not want to come into the classroom they did not insist or even encourage him. The result was that some children had very erratic attendance records. We have, however, reached a point where many of the children rarely miss a day at school and where the parents initiate the home/school contact themselves. Indeed, some parents adjust the child's age in order to place him in school before his third birthday! The children themselves accept preschool as natural to them and are anxious to bring their younger brothers and sisters to school. While there is very little absenteeism among the children, we still have the phenomenon of regular migration within the country, and to England. This movement is quite upsetting for the children. It breaks the pattern, it fractures the trust we build up with them and it can cause behaviour and adjustment problems when the child returns to preschool. We have, however, very little control over the migration, it is very much a part of traveller culture.

The preschool service itself has expanded its role over the years; we have built up a network of contacts with the local Health personnel. The speech therapist, for instance, visits the school on request and does routine hearing testing on the children; the social workers are available if a child needs referral for emotional or psychological difficulties. The visiting teacher arranges for a smooth transition into primary school; this service is one of the most valuable as Maugie Francis has the benefit of personal knowledge of the children and of the infant teachers and can ensure that the child's personality is taken into account when placing him in an infant class.

The work in the classroom has changed over the years and varies somewhat with each group of children. The core activities are playbased i.e. sand and water play, home play with particular emphasis on facilitating the boys with doll play (in the traveller culture it is difficult for children to break out of the traditional male/female roles), painting, construction and the usual pre-infant and junior infant activities.

There are, however, a number of areas on which we concentrate. These are language development and the strengthening of the hand muscles.

Language

The traveller child often comes to school with a very limited vocabulary and with poor

speech patterns. This may be linked to the parents having poor speech and with the fact that the child spends quite a lot of time with other children and so keeps baby-talk later than settled children. There is also the traveller habit of speaking very quickly and with an accent unfamiliar to "settled" ears. The children often do not listen very well either. So to help in the vocabulary development we use a range of very simple teaching aids like pictures of every day objects, the L.D.A. "Look Hear" tapes and picture sets; and auditory discrimination tapes, such as those in the *Rainbow* reading scheme. We would spend a lot of time working with the children, in a group and individually, naming objects and discussing their uses.

Hand Development

Many of the children have poor muscle tone in their hands and their control of crayons, scissors etc. is less well developed than one would expect for their age. They would rarely have held a scissors, so one must begin by showing them how to hold it, manipulate it and eventually cut card with it. Again we use simple aids like a selection of jars with screw-on lids for manipulative skills, and as a prelude to the more structured hand/eye co-ordinated activities.

There are two particular things you may find in a traveller preschool that might not be so important in a settled class; there are lots of toy horses and a plentiful supply of blocks. I mention these in the context of my own class, because the horses are the very favourite toys, from the rocking horse to the small plastic ones to the horse pictures on the walls.

Nearly all the children's families deal in horses so horse breeding, buying and selling are very much part of their lives. The blocks are there to be used as anything from scrap to firewood for sale, again the collection of scrap and the dealing in wood, Christmas trees, holly etc. are an integral part of the family economy.

Where to now?

We started off in 1981 with one teacher, paid a small weekly wage from a Health Board grant, and a panel of voluntary assistants. We now have two classes, two part time teachers, paid by the Department of Education, and two trained Childcare Workers.

The childcare workers are employed as teachers' aides but are now set to take on a new role.

This promises to be a very exciting development. With a grant from the National Lottery the preschool service is moving into an outreach project. The childcare workers will go out into the traveller community in an attempt to reach those children not already being served by the two preschools. They will visit the families on the sites and in their own caravans and houses and carry out play activities with the children and mothers together. The eventual aim is to provide an early childhood education scheme for all traveller children under the age of five years and to expand the links with the other services in order to build up a comprehensive and integrated service to mothers and toddlers.

It's all a long way from running around the room after a lively swearing four year old, but then, like everything else, it's all in a day's work!