

PRE- SCHOOL EDUCATION



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PRE-SCHOOL WITH A DIFFERENCE : THE MOBILE UNIT, AUCKLAND

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The YWCA Mobile Unit began in August this year after months of planning by the YWCA, Department of Education Pre-School Advisors and Community Workers from West Auckland. With a grant from the Child Health Foundation for \$13,000 for three years the YWCA bought a Toyota Corolla station wagon to carry two teachers and basic equipment to playgroups in West Auckland. The government approved the salaries of two kindergarten teachers and Kim Spackman and I were duly appointed. We are both strong advocates for kindergarten teachers working in alternative pre-schools and we were very enthusiastic about the prospects of developing a mobile pre-school.

Equipment and Travel

The grant covers the initial cost of the vehicle and equipment and allows for running expenses over the next three years. With the wagon garaged at the Massey Community House we travel up to 12 kms

to any one group which gives us time to travel to three groups in one day if necessary. Our basic equipment covers puzzles, books, manipulative equipment, paint and brushes, crayons and a cassette tape recorder.

Where to Start

The problem of where to start was overcome by our being introduced to existing play groups by the pre-school advisor. The first three weeks were spent getting ourselves orientated and meeting parents and people who service the areas — Plunket and Public Health Nurses, Headmasters and Social Workers. This has enabled us to have effective liaison with all these people.

Rolls

The original brief was for us to work with four groups of twenty-five children enrolled between ages 2½ and 5 attending with their mothers twice a week. We

found as the term developed that afternoons were invaluable for home visiting and researching areas for new groups so this was not possible. We are presently involved with 4 morning groups and one meeting in the afternoon.

Within our five groups the number of children attending varies considerably. Our smallest group which is at Swanson meets in a private home, has ten children enrolled but a total of twenty in attendance, while Taikata group has 40 enrolled and nearly 60 attending. The numbers can therefore be more than 25 as the age range is actually one month to five years due to siblings being present. As the groups are voluntary new families arriving cannot be turned away. Although after seven weeks there are 110 children enrolled the actual number is far more.

An Area of Population Growth

The Mobile Unit is an alternative type of pre-school education which allows staff to move from one venue to another working with different groups of children and mothers. West Auckland was chosen as the area for the Unit as a tremendous growth of new housing has led to existing pre-school facilities being unable to cope with the demand, a common situation in other similar areas in New Zealand. Massey has an estimated population of 13,000 with 1 free kindergarten, 2 private kindergartens and 1 play centre. A high percentage of the population is of pre-school age. The mobility of the unit allows us to call at alternative places such as halls, community houses and private homes, meeting the needs where they exist.

Parents' Own Decision

The groups we are supporting have arisen from a group of mothers who have taken the initiative to meet together to produce activities for their pre-schoolers. We were surprised to find how many such groups operate without some form of professional assistance. The parents of the Massey Playgroup were in this situation and were delighted to receive the guidance that we offer. Playgroups are non-affiliated with no rules and regulations, each group working according to their own re-

sources and within their own limitations. We experienced a good example of resourcefulness at Taikata where parents made their own paint brushes from dowelling with sponge attached.

We were anxious that parents decide for themselves if they wished us to assist them and this democratic and co-operative decision making by all the parents meant that good relationships were immediately established between us and the group. We very much "lead from behind" fitting into the existing pattern of each group.

There is no doubt that the unit operating in the area gave impetus to other mothers to begin a playgroup, asking for our assistance and support for a time. This happened at Ranui where a playcentre had recently closed. We felt that trained teachers perhaps brought in mothers who were particularly hesitant about being involved in a playgroup.

The roll of one group which had not changed considerably over the past year has more than doubled since we started visiting. It appears that the added stimulation and ideas we provide involve mothers more enthusiastically in such groups.

Problems

What about the problems and difficulties of a Mobile Unit? So far the greatest difficulty is that the demands are exceeding our resources and time. As the groups are voluntary and becoming increasingly popular we see problems in the sizes of the groups becoming too big to allow good stable relationships to develop between us and the children. Although the difficulties of supervision are alleviated by all mothers being in attendance there is limited space and equipment at times. Groups are restricted in their funds and this affects the standard of the programme able to be provided, however we feel that some pre-school experience is better than none at all, as was the case at one group where we provided paintbrushes, bright paint and large pieces of paper. What a delight it was to watch those pre-schoolers paint for the first time, exploring the feeling of paint on paper and so excited to have the opportunity of doing yet another painting and another painting until the floor was literally covered with their work.

Strengths

The strengths of the Mobile Unit appear to outweigh any problems. There is total co-operative involvement of parents in the whole programme. With all the members of the family under five the pressure on mothers is eased and they are not tempted to leave one or two children at home while an older one attends kindergarten.

The Unit provides qualified staff and facilities instantly in an area of need without years of fundraising for kindergarten or playcentre. It can also be an alternative while such fund-raising is going on, as staff and wagon can move on when another type of pre-school is established. There are advantages in the staff going to parents. The parents don't need transport — the facility goes to them.

Particularly exciting has been the support and interest given to the unit by other agencies and the local community pre-

school advisors, Kindergarten Association, community workers, teachers, local schools and businesses have all been anxious to help where they can. This has created a tremendously exciting working atmosphere.

More importantly such a unit provides a different and flexible approach to early childhood education. Correspondence from other Mobile Units — Christchurch, Lower Hutt and Marlborough has shown this flexibility in each unit adapting to local area needs with differing equipment and approaches to children and parents.

Since the inception of this unit Kim and I have been thrilled to be involved in this exciting approach to early childhood education. We look to an increasing awareness of these different approaches which have become inevitable with changes in society. The Mobile Unit is a result of this awareness of the need for change and we encourage all other teachers to accept these challenges.