

THE ROLE OF A SCHOOL COMMUNITY WORKER

THE SUBURB

The State Housing Department commenced building the new suburb on approximately 200 acres of farmland 3km from the centre of Burnie, a regional town of 20,000. Stage 1 of the new Primary School consisting of 6 rooms was opened in 1969.

The siting of the school was central to the new suburb and was bordered by about 7 acres of Council Grounds set aside for recreation.

At this stage the suburb had a barren appearance as the cleared farmland had only a few stands of timber and a creek flowing near the school.

Six years later the housing had increased dramatically and annually new rooms were being built at the school. Attendance had climbed from 130 to 493.

There were no public buildings in the area. No corner shop, church, newsagent, creche, post office or hall and only an irregular bus service to the township. Luckily there were no high rise units. People moving into the area were often from the country, seeking employment or from interstate. Most had young children and were housebound.

If Dad drove to work, Mum had to rely on the bus to get the shopping or walk with the pram to the next suburb over 2km away on unmade footpaths — often in cold, wet weather.

Parents were involved with furnishing new homes and preparing their gardens as well as being concerned that their children settled happily into the new school.

Frustrating and stressful circumstances are bound to occur in such situations.

These were nuclear families who did not know their neighbours and who had no relations nearby.

As Dr Densen Gerber stated recently in a talk given in Launceston, the nuclear family can be defined "at worst as the first act of violence against the child" and "is not a viable lifestyle for many people within our society".

Families naturally had economic difficulties and often both parents were working different shifts. It does not help newly arrived folk to settle or improve their self image when the suburb gets labelled as an economic risk and shopkeepers announce that they will not give the residents credit.

Similar problems occur in all suburbs, but there is probably a higher percentage in new developing areas as people with the greatest need are given preference for housing — these include the unemployed, single parents and larger families.

THE SCHOOL

The school had the usual problems of establishing itself.

1. New teachers learning to work together;
2. Student numbers increasing faster than building developments;
3. Builders, bulldozers, electric drilling causing distraction;
4. A very limited amount of school equipment.

Besides this a continual flow of new students were arriving to be placed in class groups.

Unfortunately Monday morning was clean up time after the weekend "parties" — teachers collecting bottles and cans; checking the number of windows broken, the key holes stuffed with matches and replanting trees or filling in the holes where they had been.

A weekly visit from C.I.B. seemed to be routine. The frustrations of this type of area were manifesting themselves in the form of petty and sometimes major crimes.

Vandalism was prevalent as the youngsters had "nothing

to do", "nowhere to play" and so "messed about" on building sites.

Other crimes and social problems we have encountered include child abuse, pilfering, slander, incest, emotional deprivation, shoplifting, fraud, prostitution, drug over-doses, wife bashing and deserted wives.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY WORKER

Fortunately in 1975 our school was invited to make a submission to the Schools Commission.

Following Staff discussion it was agreed that the school and children needed a better image. If the school could become the focal point in the community and the families invited to use the facilities and organise clubs it would be advantageous to all. We needed to create more opportunity for positive communication between school and home.

The Principal and Staff were already being used by parents in times of stress — whether in regard to children fighting on the way home from school or in regard to neighbours throwing stones on each other's roof tops.

The decision was taken to apply for a Home/School Liaison Worker — a name we simply dreamt up.

Our aim was that this person should provide:

- (a) a neutral contact;
- (b) a 'listening ear' at all times;
- (c) information on the services at school and in the community.

My primary function was to introduce the appointee to the Police, the Child Welfare, the Social Service, Probation and Parole, Housing Department Welfare Office, A.P.P.M. Personnel Officer, Child Assessment Centre and the Education Guidance and Welfare Branch, and to ensure that they fully understood that her role was compatible with theirs in that she was supportive and not competitive.

Initially our School Community Worker had "an office" at the end of a corridor but after further additions we utilized a small room adjacent to the Kindergarten. This is situated by the driveway and parents can call in — unobtrusively if they desire — to see the School Community Worker. Everyone knows the barriers of visiting a school or in fact any State Building. The task of simply finding your way through the many passages is bad enough without the added worry of getting 'dressed up' trying to make a good impression and feeling the teacher will be judging you and your child.

During the second year of funding we were allocated money to build a Parent Room which we hoped would overcome these fears of entering the building. Many parents had unhappy school experiences and were very reticent of the school system as a whole.

A small area close to the young children's classrooms was furnished with comfortable chairs and provided with an urn, mugs and plenty of tea and coffee. Parents were invited to have coffee while waiting for their children and many a daily problem, arising at home or at school, was talked over with a friend or the School Community Worker while holding a hot drink.

Parents asked to assist in the classrooms, by helping 3 or 4 children cook, knit or stitch, were pleased to find that they could really be of value and the children were delighted if "my Mum helped us today". This provided mutual interest and a common topic of conversation in the home.

There are many other areas with which parents now help but it is that initial step that is the hardest to take.

The need for group participation was noted and, in co-operation with Adult Education, a Multicraft Class and Yoga Group were begun and held at the school. The School Community Worker continually assesses the needs and encourages parents to use outside groups. At the present time contacts have been made with the Asthma Foundation, G.R.O.W., and Basic Literacy for Adults.

It was evident that Budgeting was a major problem for many families. To put aside \$10 for an Adult Education Class was impossible for many who wished to participate. With good co-operation and the understanding of the local Adult Education Director, we were able to allow parents to pay weekly — \$1 a time.

The School Community Worker then utilized school staff such as the Sister, Dental Nurse, Guidance Officer and Teachers in leading a single afternoon session. These included topics such as First Aid in the home, Grade 1 Reading, Nutrition, Speech Therapy, and Normal Child Development.

From these discussions other groups evolved and still meet weekly. These include the Friendship Group for Lone Parents, Know Your Child, Weight Watchers, Bingo and Macrame.

These discussions often led to further social interaction. Following one, parents asked for a survey on the possibility of serving hot meals at school.

Visiting the homes has been a major part of the school Community Worker's job — either on request of a parent or a teacher. Home illness, confusion or misunderstanding over school issues and like traumas precipitate these visits.

The School Community Worker often supports parents in intimidating, or embarrassing situations. She has accompanied parents at the Children's Court, helped with Family Planning, organised Home Help in times of illness, and alerted parents to Social Service facilities.

It is a daily occurrence for children to visit School Community Workers on the way to school.

The children love to call in and see her — sometimes just to have the full attention of an adult, to let off steam by 'telling-tales', or to bring a message from Mum.

The teachers use her room (as a time-out room) for children who may be temporarily upset and not able to cope with the class work.

The availability of immediate feedback on a child's home situation is invaluable to the teacher.

A more intimate knowledge of the child and its problems provides better assessment and quicker adjustment to the learning needs of that child.

The Holiday Club was another brain-child of the School Community Worker who originally organised and supervised the Club with the help of parents.

A four week club was organised for the children in the Summer vacation and one week during the other holidays. These were most successful and appreciated by the working parents. For the past eighteen months this Holiday Club has been organised and staffed entirely by parents from the school.

EVALUATION

The Schools Commission requires an annual evaluation of the program, so we keep facts and figures. The following will give you some indication of what use was made of the School Community Worker during 1st Term this year — (19th February - 25th May).

- 114 visits were made to the School Community Worker by 47 separate people;
- 77 Home visits were made by her to 57 homes, 33 of these families were not included in the first group, so that the case load is 80 families;
- 17 individual children are being counselled as well as a group of 10 children; 27 children were taken home because of illness and eight others were taken to the Casualty Department of local hospital.

Some reasons why the parents called at the School during this time can be seen in the Annexure. All these matters are a product of an unstable home and reflect in the behaviour of the children at the school.

There are many agencies available to these people but often, being new arrivals, they do not know where to make contact or are often too shy or proud.

The ability to talk things out at pre crisis stage often negates the necessity for further Professional involvement.

It is not our intention to take over the role of the parents but support and encourage them to be successful in rearing their children.

It is impossible to say statistically that crimes have been reduced. Self image, self confidence and decision making are areas in which the staff believe a short term improvement is evident and which must invariably lead to long term benefits.

We believe that the climate of a happy secure home carries over into the school and a child will benefit from the understanding and involvement of his parents in his education. The real essence of this position is that the School Community Worker identifies with these people, is available within walking distance and so belongs to the people; she is non judgemental, positive and trusted.

The role of the School Community Worker has been a vital one at my school — some other schools now have a person in a similar role. You may ask is there a need to have this 'neutral person' appointed in every Primary and High School?

Perhaps these comments from two of our parents are indicative of their needs and feelings:

Mrs A. (suffering from bashings from husband) "I've come here because there is nowhere else to go."

Mrs B. (who sent a note) "Thanks for being there when I needed a friend."

My Staff are firmly convinced that "the ability to cope decreases with the level of stress" whether applied to the children in classroom or to Parents at home.

If this is a yard stick we can say that crimes against, or committed by, our children would have been greater if we had not had our School Community Worker.

**Antonia Miller,
Principal,
Acton Primary School,
Burnie, Tasmania.**

ANNEXURE

Reasons why parents called to see School Community Worker during 1st Term, 1979:

- Query re Loan Issue;
- Child upset at school;
- Feeling bad with name calling;
- Husband diagnosed Hodgkinson disease;

Let's have a coffee morning;
 Row with husband over children;
 Help fill in forms (illiterate single mother);
 Wants to leave de facto and get a flat;
 Going mad with no intelligent conversation;
 Concern re child's work;
 Boyfriend a 'homo';
 Children don't want to come to school;
 Children fighting on way home;
 Child very ill;
 P. & F. business;
 Concerns re teenagers;
 No money — husband sick;
 Child slow learner;
 Child Asthmatic — swimming lessons;
 Row with husband;

Weight watchers;
 Soccer for boys;
 Sister no food;
 Estranged husband arrived from Victoria;
 Being bashed by husband;
 Child not settled;
 No food;
 Paranoid — "they're talking about me";
 Give children dinner money;
 New parent;
 Just can't cope with girls and money;
 Fight over custody;
 New parent;
 Daughter ran away;
 Paranoid Schizophrenia — emotional problems.

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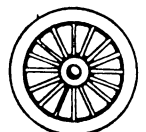
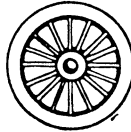
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