

DO PRE-SCHOOL DISTANCE EDUCATORS REQUIRE SPECIALIST PREPARATION?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the role of the pre-school distance educator to determine whether specialist preparation is required for pre-school teachers to function effectively as distance educators. In considering this role, this paper will examine the following key areas:

1. urban and rural environments;
2. the role of parents as educators;
3. the preparation of pre-school teachers; and
4. the preparation of pre-school teachers to teach in a School of Distance Education (SDE).

BACKGROUND

Since the late 1980's, Distance Education in Queensland has been decentralised. Regional centres have been established in Charters Towers, Mt. Isa, Longreach, Charleville, Cairns, Rockhampton, Emerald and Brisbane. Most of these centres cater for children from pre-school to Year 10, and form part of the educational service delivery in these regional areas.

The School of Distance Education (SDE) seeks to develop a programme based on the home teaching process. Teachers involved in Schools of Distance Education are required to develop curriculum materials as well as guide parents in the use of the same materials with isolated children.

Contact is made with the parents and the children through telephones, facsimiles and letter writing. Annual visits by distance educators are made to central regional locations in an effort to make face-to-face contact with children and their families.

It has been suggested that pre-school teachers are currently selected to teach in the SDE (formerly the Queensland Pre-school Correspondence Unit - QPCU) as a result of possessing some of the following attributes:

1. are over twenty five years of age;
2. have had several years teaching experience in a pre-school centre;
3. have had experience in a rural areas; and
4. have had some children of their own so as to have had first-hand experience of the parental role.

(Grant, J., Ashby, G., and Clemesha, B. 1978)

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Exploring urban and rural environments

The literature presents views of urban and rural environments which are divergent and dependent on ideologies that are distinctly different. Kapferer (1990) and Bessant (1978)

propose that the differences between the two are imaginary. Stevens (1989) suggests that there are stark contrasts between rural and urban communities and explains the diverseness in terms of social, economic and technological differences.

Australia is one of the most highly urbanised countries in the world. In this scenario rural residents may perceive themselves as a minority group, negotiating their place in the wider community. The geographical location of rural populations hinders their accessibility to services and resources. Appeals by rural communities for access to an educational service seen to equal urban areas, are met by government policies and funding to provide services to equal those in cities (Dawkins and Kerin, 1989).

Rural areas do not require rural education (an education, which prepares students for life in the rural community) but require an education (Clark, 1990) that will not discriminate or make the recipients different from those living in other areas to a greater degree than they would otherwise be. The concept "Education in Rural Areas" speaks of education

applicable to all students living in all areas and including a component, the size and extent of which is most important, to meet the local community needs.

(Clark, S. 1990, p.43)

Discontent arises when rural residents perceive that decisions concerning their educational needs are made in urban areas with little consultation with rural stakeholders. The feeling of an urban system being imposed on a rural environment is strong. Examples of this are:

1. the "one best system model" (Nachtigal, 1982); and
2. the "formal school system" which have legal and financial means to control programmes and a pool of specialists available to work on educational developments.

(Darnell and Higgins, 1983)

Walton (1990) believes the basis of the problem reflects an urban misunderstanding of the rural context.

2. The recognition of the parent as a facilitator and educator

Developmental psychology supports the concept of parents as educators (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Goodsen and Hess, 1975; Shcafer, 1972; and Wadsworth, 1980) and acknowledges that parents exert a powerful and lasting influence on their children. Young children are dependent on their parents to:

1. encourage their sense of curiosity of what goes on around them;
2. offer guidance in how to interpret incidental learnings that take place around them;
3. support their achievements; and
4. plan, share and listen to each other's ideas.

(Harley, 1985, p. 158)

Even though the parent is viewed as the main facilitator and educator of the child, the role of the teacher is still important. According to Harley (1985), there are three main aspects of the teacher's role:

1. The teacher will be required to work with each child-parent dyad within the context of the family's own social and cultural environment.

2. As the parent is viewed as the main facilitator and educator, much of the teacher's role will be oriented towards helping the parent understand the "how", "what" and "why" of the early education process. Without this understanding, the role of the parent becomes subsidiary to the teacher rather than one gaining in competence.
3. The quality of the personal and professional interaction between teachers, parents and children provides the most effective educational resource. While curricula materials and content are vitally important in all distance education programmes, they should be perceived as a support only, otherwise the credibility and skills of a teacher and the parent are devalued.

(Harley, 1985; p. 162-163)

In essence, a system which allows parents and teachers to work together is required (Early Childhood Curriculum Project, 1992) however, teachers need to take the initiative to encourage parents to be co-educators and "key people" in their child's education.

3. Educational Preparation of Pre-school Teachers

Early childhood teacher education programmes throughout Australia have undergone significant changes in the past decade. Over the past few years, there have been a range of reports and reform papers that have contained implications for teacher education and for the employment of qualified teachers within the early childhood field. In developing pre-service courses for pre-school teachers, staff within tertiary institutions proposed courses which built on existing programs, and at the same time considered current trends and issues relevant to the provision of service for children from birth to eight years.

In a survey of every pre-service early childhood teacher education course in Australia, Briggs (1984) points to an agreement amongst early childhood educators whereby "child development" was considered as the basis for all curriculum planning. However, there is a growing concern amongst early childhood educators about the lack of child development courses in Australian universities. This has since been exacerbated with the amalgamation of universities and institutes of tertiary education, some of which offered specialised subjects such as "creative arts", "social context of education", "exploring the environment", and "exploring literacy and numeracy".

As a consequence, inappropriate primary/secondary school subjects and foundations of education programmes have been imposed on/increased in early childhood courses at the expense of the child development, human relations, family and ethnic studies and opportunities to work with families in a wide range of services. The result is that some courses have moved farther away from client needs than ever before.

(Briggs, F. 1984; p. 12)

Those teachers receiving pre-service preparation in an institution where early childhood is not an area of specialisation, but subsumed into the general teaching programme, encounter a diminished presentation of child development courses related to early childhood education and consequently suffer from inappropriate subjects imposed upon them for their areas of specialisation (Briggs, 1984). The structure of their courses has often been determined by economic considerations and the pressure for rationalization (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1973). When Briggs (1984) surveyed early childhood teacher courses in Australia, it was apparent

tertiary institutions were using markedly different methods, curricula and philosophies to prepare early childhood teachers for the workforce.

Of greater concern is the fact that early childhood educators have all but lost control of the structure, and in some cases, even the content of training for their own profession (Briggs, 1984). Course changes have occurred at the instigation of administrators with expertise in other disciplines and have borne little or no relationship to workforce needs (Briggs, 1984). This has recently been highlighted in the publication, "Early Childhood Education Project" E.C.E.P. (1992) where respondents were critical of the lack of central philosophy or co-ordination at the state level that would ensure a cohesive early childhood education policy across all sectors.

The boundaries of pre-service teacher education have become confused and a divergence of opinion exists between administrators and practitioners as to what is needed by employers and graduates.

Briggs (1984) cites Kast and Rosenzweig's experience where they found a profession (without control over its own training) "cannot respond quickly or efficiently to the needs of the client, the quality of the service deteriorates and in the long run the graduates become unemployable.."

(Briggs, F. 1984, p. 12)

The Queensland Board of Teacher Education (Q.B.T.E.) however, claims

the needs of beginning pre-school and kindergarten teachers are adequately met.

(Q.B.T.E. 1988, p.25)

4. The preparation of pre-school teachers to teach in the School of Distance Education

Early childhood pre-service teacher education *per se* is experiencing difficulties in quality course preparation. The preparation of rural early childhood teachers continues in a similar vein. The Commonwealth School's Commission into Schooling in Rural Australia (1988) revealed that adjustment to rural teaching would be improved by pre-service preparation, but teacher training institutions generally failed to acknowledge the need for specialised training for rural appointments. This situation provides little opportunity for students to teach in a rural setting or acquire an understanding of the needs of beginning teachers in sparsely populated regions (Young, 1981).

Teaching in rural areas is now deemed a non-typical teaching experience (Hegtvedt-Wilson, Hegtvedt and Bullock 1982). Country service is no longer a fore-gone conclusion, particularly if female early childhood teachers marry early on in their career. No course is available in any of the teacher education institutions in Queensland for pre-service training in early childhood distance education (Lambert, 1993; Harley, 1993).

Grant et. al. (1978) in their study into "Teacher's Perceptions of the Pre-school Correspondence Programme" found that inexperience was by far the most prominent factor influencing the quality of interactions between parents and teachers via the correspondence school, (see Appendix: Tables 1 & 2). It was found that over sixty percent of the staff were under twenty five years of age (See Appendix Table 3, Grant et. al. 1978). In addition, over eighty percent of the teachers had no children of their own (See Appendix Table 4, Grant, et. al. 1978) and therefore no first-hand experience with the role of mother or father. Some teachers had difficulty in transferring the role of "teacher" to the parent and taking on the role of facilitator (See Appendix Table 5). Teachers who had resided in rural areas (58%) found it easier to cope

with the demands of teaching by distance mode, than those who came to the SDE in their first year as a teacher.

SUMMARY

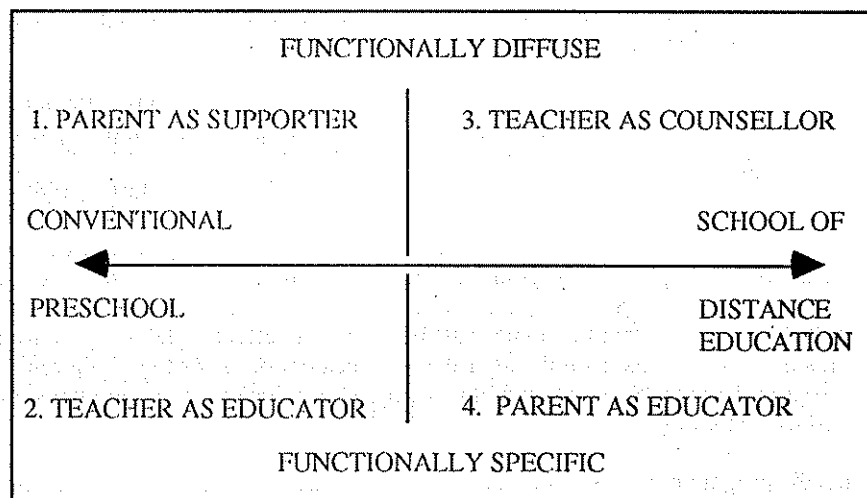
The literature concerning this topic suggests that early childhood distance educators are prepared in institutions which fail to cater for the specialised needs of the rural situation. Recognition is given to the place of parent/s in the role of educator in the home-based learning environment. It also highlights the importance of including courses to develop interpersonal and communication skills in teacher education institutions. Finally, the selection of teachers to teach in the SDE is currently changing away from inexperienced teachers who have just completed their pre-service training to those who have more experience as a pre-school teacher, particularly in rural areas (Harley, 1993).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The following discussion can be conceptualised into two fields. First, there is the functional Style (FS) and Facilitator/Educator (FE) field. Both FS and FE share common ideas about the uniqueness of the individual child and stress the needs of each child (E.C.C.: 1978). Second, there is the Conventional Pre-school and School of Distance Education/Isolated Area field. Both of these components share common ground with respect to children as individuals, growing and developing at their own rate.

These two fields can be represented along vertical and horizontal axes, (See Figure 1) and embedded in an environment where teachers and parents are partners.

Figure 1



PARTNERSHIP OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS

The axes in Figure 1 represent continua. The vertical axis represents the scope of relating styles from those that are limitless, to those that are restricted. The horizontal axis represents the continuum from conventional pre-school centres to the SDE. Each quadrant represents possible

permutations of relating styles between educator and child. It is hypothesised that conventional pre-school teachers are found in quadrant two, whereas parents of distance education children will be more likely to be found in quadrant four (Harley, 1985).

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS:

The rest of this paper will be devoted to exploring the following questions:

1. Are pre-school teachers in distance education required to reconceptualise their role as a teacher?
2. Is "basic" pre-school teacher education sufficient preparation for pre-school distance educators?
3. Do pre-school distance educators require specialist preparation?

Question 1: Are pre-school teachers in distance education required to reconceptualise their role as a teacher?

Harley (1985) believes that if early childhood distance education programmes are to be more effective, a reconceptualisation of their role is required. The four key premises are as follows:

1. Differences in the settings, roles and role relationships between the structure of home-based and school-based programmes need to be acknowledged.
2. The role of the parent as the main educator and facilitator must be clearly acknowledged.
3. The particular orientation of the role of the teacher, working in support of parents, needs to be identified.
4. The development of effective interpersonal skills in working with adults and children needs to be a requirement for all teachers working in early childhood distance education programmes.

(Harley, 1985: p.158)

If pre-school distance education programmes focus on the development of curricula and the use of technology to implement programmes then, according to Harley (1985), they are prescriptive and pre-emptive. Rather, the trend must be to concentrate more on people, namely parents and children. This means that the home must be seen as an effective learning environment and that parents must be seen as natural and effective educators of or for their children. Consequently, the programme must be based on a philosophy whose theoretical assumptions are indicative of home-based learning.

When the programme works from the advantage of the home-based concept it also implies that:

1. learning begins at birth and is a life long process;
2. parents are viewed as the primary educators of their children;
3. the family and community are major sources of educational influence; and
4. every individual is both a teacher and a learner.

(Harley, 1985; p.159)

The challenge then lies in the training of teachers to be able to practise such conceptualisation. Early childhood theory embraces the four concepts outlined above and seeks to prepare its teachers to think in this mode. This is easy to accept in theory, but difficult to put into practice even in the realms of a conventional pre-school setting.

In a conventional pre-school programme, the teacher interacts with children in an environment which has been specifically created for this purpose with intermittent involvement by parents. The teacher is trained to build a classroom climate which can facilitate a wide range of developmental objectives. The teacher has total control of the program both as facilitator and practitioner.

In the home-based programme, it is the parent who interacts directly with the child within an environment where the teacher could be said to have intermittent involvement. The parent becomes a natural educator, while the teacher takes on a pastoral role. In this role the teacher becomes involved with a whole range of family dynamics and can be referred to as "counsellor" (Harley, 1987).

This partnership would not be usual in a conventional pre-school setting. To work effectively in this partnership distance educators would need to reconstruct their thinking about their role as "teacher" and their thinking about the environment in which they will work. There are differences between the classroom setting and the home where isolated children are educated. Isolated children are taught in small family groups. Urban children in a conventional pre-school are taught in large homogenous groups. How people relate to each other within the above groups are quite different too. Relationships within the family, for example, are functionally diffuse, (ie: the interaction between the participants is bound in such a way that the rights and duties towards one another are almost limitless) while those in the conventional pre-school are functionally specific, (ie: individuals are restricted to particular elements of relationship, defined in terms of competence and status) (Harley, 1985). (See Conceptual Framework) when the pre-school unit within the SDE attempts to superimpose the relationships of the school on the family the discontinuities are exacerbated.

However, a distance educator must come to:

understand the differences which exist between home and school-based teaching, not only in terms of different educational settings but also with regard to the role and behaviours exhibited by parents and teachers and their inter-relationship between the two.

Harley, 1987; p.6

Much of the role of the pre-school distance educator will be similar to that of a consultant. In order to show parents how to use programme materials and resources effectively pre-school teachers will need to develop ways to explain and demonstrate philosophical ideas in laymen's terms. This will involve developing a workable relationship with the parents based on effective communication and understanding to show how the education materials support the home-based pre-school programme. To be able to do this, teachers need to be confident in their own ability, need to know what they want to communicate, how best to do so and in a language that makes sense to parents.

The development of SPAN playgroups can be cited as an example of how parents have not understood what is required of a pre-school programme. It also shows how parents will revert to what they know best if they cannot comprehend what is required in a programme that is based on a philosophy that is foreign to them.

SPAN playgroups were developed as an extension activity of the original Pre-school Correspondence Programme. The aim was to enlarge the opportunity for peer group social contact between children and parents. It was not restricted to pre-school aged children. Free play was an important component of the SPAN playgroups since it is one of the foundations of a sound early educational programme. However, it was discovered as a result of surveys to parents (Grant, et. al. 1978) that some groups moved away from free-play towards more parental organisation and structured activities, for example; parents directing play according to their preconceived ideas of how children should play.

Abstract concepts like socio-emotional development, self concept and free-play, and the importance of these in a developmental programme need to be fully understood by parents, if they are to become effective teachers in the programme. This will present an important challenge for pre-school teachers in the SDE.

What then is the role of pre-school teachers in distance education? Their role is to teach parents to teach.

Question 2: Is "basic" pre-school teacher education sufficient preparation for pre-school distance educators?

Pre-school distance educators in Queensland must complete the same basic pre-service course as conventional pre-school teachers. In most cases, early childhood courses have been subsumed into general teaching degree courses, with the exception of those institutions offering a specialised degree in early childhood education. This has meant that early childhood courses have been:

attached to departments, schools or faculties housing other disciplines and primary education or primary and secondary education.

Briggs, 1984; pp. 5

Where institutions have offered specialisation in early childhood education (and these are in the minority) scope has been provided for them to include specialisation in areas such as: "Young Children with Special Needs", "Science for Early Childhood" and "Children's Services & Administration". Areas of pre-service preparation generally include the domains of: Liberal Studies, studies incorporating the Child; Family and Society, Early Childhood Education and the Curriculum, Early Childhood Services, Management and Personnel and Practical Experience in an early childhood environment. This is significantly different to those institutions offering a general teaching degree in education where their focus concentrates on:

Complementary Studies, Primary Curriculum Studies and Practical Experience in a School Environment (Lambert, 1993; Dickson 1993). In relation to specific training for rural areas, the scope encompasses "Teaching in Rural Contexts". This is limited to "one off" subjects, rather than a comprehensive course specifically designed to prepare teachers for rural areas.

Since the introduction of Human Relationships Education into Queensland State Schools, teacher training institutions have had to prepare beginning teachers with strategies to teach effective relational skills (Matheson, 1988). This in part, is an answer to the criticism of Kinson (1984) and Rodd (1986) who call for the introduction of courses in developing interpersonal skills. It is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of these courses.

Since early childhood distance educators and conventional pre-school teachers experience similar pre-service training it is questionable whether the "basic" preparation received in tertiary institutions is sufficient preparation for pre-school distance educators.

Question 3: Do pre-school distance educators require specialist preparation?

From the material presented thus far it is clear the preparation of pre-school distance educators is found wanting in several areas. They appear to have a limited understanding of rural issues and lack confidence in relinquishing roles for which they have been trained. This has been due to a pre-service training which has lost its specificity in relation to the field of early childhood. Limited training in the area of relational skills has further complicated matters and in some cases hindered partnerships between parents and teachers.

All of these factors point to the inadequacies of current practices of selecting teachers to teach in the SDE. Whilst Harley (1993) argues that many of the skills are learned on the job, results from the surveys still point to the need for specialist training to help teachers reconceptualise their roles and develop effective interpersonal skills. In order to be effective distance educators, teachers need to understand the difference between home-based teaching and school-based teaching. In essence it requires teachers to participate in specialist in-service training which includes;

- a. opportunities to gain an understanding of the differences between rural and urban areas.
- b. interpersonal and communication skills
- c. strategies for re-evaluating one's role as a teacher; and
- d. a model of teaching where the teacher becomes a facilitator.

DISCUSSION

A distance education programme only exists because of a national policy on distance education, which assumes that rural Australians have traditionally participated in education and training to a lesser degree than their metropolitan counterparts (Dawkins and Kerin, 1989). It is therefore, not only within the interests of rural people, to make education an equity issue. Thomas (1984) argues that early childhood programmes are advantageous for rural areas because of the academic benefit to children, and the support and training the programme gives to parents. This means teachers must be seen to practise the concept of "parents as partners in education" and promote home-based education as equitable to that of a conventional urban pre-school.

To do this distance educators will need well developed interpersonal skills. Rodd (1986) believes the complexities of communication and interpersonal skills can be taught, and should be an integral part of the pre-service curriculum for beginning teachers. The introduction of integrated and systematic training in relational skills in pre-service teacher training could contribute to developing students with the abilities to deal with all kinds of people in a variety of situations, and provide knowledge and confidence to move successfully from one role to another when the situation requires it. This is dependent on individuals being willing to change as well as learn.

If students recognise that there are different styles of communicating and interacting, some more appropriate and constructive than others and, more importantly, that they are responsible for their own behaviours, then students have a choice about what they say, how they say it and are the resulting effects of changing inappropriate styles of communication and interpersonal styles of communication and interpersonal interaction where necessary.

At the time of the surveys (Grant, *et al.* 1978) into the QPCU there was no comprehensive training in interpersonal and communication skills in early childhood teacher education within Queensland. This should not set a precedent for future teacher training but rather raises the matter as one of urgency. Urgent in the sense that current distance educators will soon be aware of their deficiencies in these skills as they move into the school of distance education.

It has been suggested earlier in this paper that early childhood teachers would need to reconceptualise their roles as teachers to be effective distance educators. They must be provided with the opportunity to participate in in-service course which would give them a foundation to construct a mindset that would enable such a reconceptualisation.

For discussion purposes only, the following suggested subject is offered as a starting point. This subject would focus on the distance educator's role as facilitator and communicator. This subject would provide teachers with a theoretical framework against which they would develop the critical skills, understandings and competencies needed for effective planning, counselling and administration in a distance education setting. This subject would enable teachers to develop clear, non-defensive and productive communication skills essential in managing relationships in the work place and enhancing organisational effectiveness.

SUBJECT OUTLINE: HOME BASED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

The year long subject will enable teachers to:

1. develop communication skills in order to improve their ability to relate to people in both personal and professional capacities in a face-to-face situation as well as a non-face-to-face situation;
2. understand theoretical issues relating to home-based education;
3. recognise the philosophical implications of distance education programmes and the role of parent educators;
4. develop strategies for developing family competence and decision making skills;
5. empower families to establish communication links and partnership with other isolated families;
6. identify relationships between political and economic arrangements in rural and urban Australia concerning the educational service for isolated children; and
7. provide students with supervised practical experience in the pre-school unit of the SDE.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear from the material presented that there is a need to introduce some form of specialised preparation for teachers contemplating employment in the pre-school unit of the SDE. It seems appropriate that this preparation takes the form of an in-service course for teachers who have met stated criteria, outlined by Grant, et. al. in background information at the outset of this paper.

As a result of this preparation, distance educators would have a positive attitude towards change and a willingness to relinquish the control of their teaching role, becoming facilitators for the parents' expertise. They would see themselves as leaders, guides and counsellors, practicing effective communication and interpersonal skills to ensure responsible and sensitive treatment of family situations.

They would explain educational concepts clearly so that parents could understand and implement them. After completing their training, distance educators would demonstrate the value of working in partnership with families in the education process, rather than upholding a philosophy that merely imposes the structure of the SDE on the parents of isolated children.

Such a role surely requires the position of distance educator to be regarded as a specialist position, and beyond the experience of beginning teachers exiting teacher education institutions.

The specialist preparation required for teachers considering teaching in early childhood distance education programmes must go beyond what is currently available in general pre-service teacher preparation if the goals of home-based education and education in rural areas are to be realised.

APPENDICES

TABLE 1: Number of years teaching pre-school by view of most important teaching function.

MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING FUNCTION

	COMMUNICATE WITH FAMILIES (by letters & tapes)		INDIVIDUALISE PROGRAM (interpret & explain)		TOTALS	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Teaching less than 1 year	8	34.8	4	17.4	12	53.2
Teaching more than 1 year	2	8.7	9	39.1	11	47.8
TOTALS	10	42.5	13	56.5	23	100.0

TABLE 2: Teacher's age by their view of parents most important function

VIEW OF PARENT'S MOST IMPORTANT FUNCTION

Interpret Programme & or give teacher feedback			Share Happy Learning Environment with Child		TOTALS	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under 25 Years	18	58.1	1	3.2	19	61.3
Over 25 Years	7	22.6	5	16.1	12	38.7
TOTALS	25	80.6	6	19.4	31	100.0

TABLE 3: Age Distribution of Teachers

Age Range	Number	Percent
Under 21	8	25.8
21 years to 25 years	11	35.5
26 years to 30 years	4	12.9
31 years to 35 years	3	9.7
36 years and over	5	16.1
TOTALS	31	100.0

TABLE 4: Number of Teacher's Children

Number of Children	Number	Percent
None	26	83.9
Two	1	3.2
Three	2	6.5
Four	1	3.2
Five	1	3.2
TOTALS	31	100.0

TABLE 5: Teacher's Judgement of Parents Role

Type of Role	Number	Percent
Parent seen as teacher	20	64.5
Parent seen as teacher's aide	6	19.4
Liaison between teacher and child-interpreting and supervising	5	16.1
TOTALS	31	100.0

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