

Catering for the Needs of Pre-School Age Children in Rural Areas: A Case Study

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Introduction

In 1985 the then Minister for Community Services (Victoria), the Hon. Caroline Hogg, announced a change of policy in relation to preschool services in Victoria; all children were to have a year of "kindergarten type experiences" in the year before school, and existing playgroups for two year olds were to be phased out, while two years of kindergarten for some children was to become the exception. This policy came about for two reasons; firstly, as a way of implementing the Cain Labor Government's policy of social justice and equity, and secondly as an attempt to be more financially accountable. While both these objectives, in hindsight, may have a somewhat hollow ring today, they brought great changes to the preschool programs of Victoria which had been established nearly a century before by voluntary organisations in response to inner city poverty and need. It meant that an effort would be made to ensure that children in isolated and/or rural pockets of Victoria were to be included in the sessional kindergarten program and that the traditional "four sessions of two and a half hours per week at a place called a kindergarten" might not be seen to be appropriate in terms of travelling distance involved for parents or children, or affordable in terms of the best use of a rapidly declining budget.

One of the more interesting results of the implementation of this process was the realisation that the state of Victoria, which appears to be so small and compact, has many pockets of isolated communities, from the deserts of the north west to the mountainous regions in the north east. In addition the notion of "rural children" is not as clear cut as may first appear. Harley (1988) has identified three different rural populations; those who live in the most isolated areas where availability and regularity of communication services (mail and telephone) is severely limited and where educational and community support services are minimal or non-existent; those who live in a lesser degree of isolation, usually within the outskirts of a larger rural community where regular communication services are available and where a network of educational and community support services exist and those who live in the hinterland of provincial and larger rural towns, but who are too far distant to attend a preschool centre, but where a network of communication services is available on a regular basis and where education and community support services are fairly accessible.

Another important factor to be considered when planning and delivering services for young children is that their access to any service is achieved largely through the efforts of their mother - "the socially-designated primary caregiver". (Coorey, 1990: 128). In this respect the utilisation of any children's service depends upon women knowing of the existence of the services and how to use them.

There is an increasing body of literature on this process of the ways in which mothers may be more involved in, and aware of, a range of health, education and care services for children, but they all revolve around the four principles of children's services; namely accessibility (and availability), affordability, appropriateness and acceptability, (Coorey, 1990), plus the rider for isolated areas that children's services cannot be delineated into separate areas, but may be combined with other human services in ways that do not occur in the metropolitan area or in large country towns. For instance the local Maternal and Child Health Nurse may co-ordinate a family day care scheme or a government sponsored occasional care centre may take form each Friday morning at the tennis club or on a Saturday afternoon at the football ground, while kindergarten services may operate through the activity of a travelling teacher in a church hall or an unused room at the local primary school.

Incerti (1989) has suggested that availability is the main criteria for an isolated mother when selecting experiences for her children and that due to the lack of access to a range of experiences, her choice is limited. However other factors such as distance involving long travelling time, cost, facilities and the need for parental involvement are important as well.

Rural Pre-School Investigation Project

With these kinds of evidence available the Child Development and Education Section of the Department of Community Services (Victoria) undertook the establishment of a Rural Preschool Investigation Project. This project, which began in 1988, had four major tasks, namely:

1. to gather data on interstate and international provisions for families with preschool age children in isolated rural areas,
2. to gather data on current services for preschool age children in the Mallee region of Victoria,
3. to analyse demographic and social analysis projections of the Mallee region in relation to children's services and
4. in light of the above data, to consider and devise alternatives to the current preschool services in rural and isolated areas.

The Working Party for the Project was interesting too; it consisted of the Program Directors of the three tertiary Early Childhood courses offered in Melbourne and a senior member of CS(V). Under the guidance of the various Program Directors graduate (fourth year) early childhood students from the three institutions undertook the data gathering tasks in the process. CS(V) provided a grant of \$30,000 to cover the costs of the three year Project.

The "Mallee Region" was selected as a typical area for an investigation of rural and isolated services for young children. The Mallee region is a large geographical area covering the top of Victoria, fringing on the South Australian and New South Wales borders. Populations vary from town to town, larger towns are increasing (Mildura 20,000) while smaller towns are decreasing (Ouyen 1,000). Population fluctuations can affect a preschool's government subsidy which is reviewed annually. The most recent cuts occurred in 1987 when several Mallee centres were cut severely (half time or less). Part time centres have difficulty attracting qualified early childhood personnel to work in them and many current positions in the Mallee region are held by Primary trained teachers. In most areas there is only one preschool in a town which all preschool aged children attend. Unlike suburban preschools, population does not appear to reflect any one race or class.

A further concern within the Mallee region is the general contracting of services in the smaller towns and hamlets as banks, car sales yards, service stations and government utilities close and the services are relocated in larger, more distant towns. This rationalisation of services has led to many rural families becoming even more isolated, and their opportunities to interact at a designated meeting place have become more limited.

Results

Two sets of data were collected from the Mallee as a starting point for the Investigation project; Dr Mellor supervised Chisholm IT (now Monash University) students in an investigation into the reasons why children now in the first year at primary school had not attended a kindergarten, while IECD students (now Melbourne University) gathered data on the kinds of preschool services used by parents in the Mallee region.

With the assistance of all the primary schools in the Mallee region all parents of children in the Preparatory grade were given a questionnaire to complete relating to their perceptions of preschool. Approximately one third of the Prep parents responded to the questionnaire. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

**Prep Grade Children's Attendance at Kindergarten
(Mallee Region) 1987**

Attended kindergarten 4 sessions per week	72%
Attended kindergarten for less than 4 sessions	21%
Did not attend kindergarten at all	7%
Reasons for non attendance:	
* lack of transport	
* location of the kindergarten	
* unsuitable kindergarten hours	
Preferable alternatives to 2½ hour sessions:	
* 2 x full day programs per week	
* extended hours programs	
* child care instead of kindergarten	
* mobile kindergarten service	
* other services, e.g. teacher run play group, toddler gym, toy library, occasional care	

The survey revealed some interesting data, albeit that it can be assumed that the thirty per cent of parents who responded to the questionnaire were those who by and large used kindergarten services:

1. there is no one reason why parents in the Mallee do not send their children to kindergarten, rather there is a combination of reasons including transport problems, hours of program operation and location of the service. A fourth problem concerned with home commitments such as farm duties at shearing time and the need to supervise older children's correspondence lessons, surfaced later.
2. as many parents requested services that were already available, these existing services need to be reviewed and publicised in order to meet the needs of the community, while further research in regard to the needs of parents is necessary to determine the services and would be most appropriate to meet the needs of rural and/or isolated families.

The second data gathering exercise was targeted at parents of preschool age children and was carried out under the auspice of IECD now the School of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne. It consisted of a questionnaire which aimed to determine whether parents of preschool age children were aware of existing services, the frequency of the services offered and the distance they would have to travel to obtain these services.

The questionnaires were distributed throughout all preschool services in the Mallee region including Maternal and Child Health Centres and Kindergartens. The response rate was a little over 30%. While the return rate is not sufficient to enable the results to be generalised to the wider population of parents within the Mallee region, they may indicate the issues which need to be

addressed when developing alternative models of service delivery in rural/ isolated regions. The results are included in Table 2.

Table 2

**Kindergarten Preferences of Parents with Children in Kindergarten
(Mallee Region) 1988**

Sessional preschool	70.8%
Play groups	8.0%
Home-based kindergarten program	4.6%
Don't know	16.0%
Disadvantages of present sessional program:	
limited session	26.2%
travel	21.5%
hours too short	15.4%
unsuitable hours	12.3%
cost of attendance	7.7%
location of kindergarten	7.7%
lack of bus services	6.2%
too far away	4.6%
Services which provide parents with "time away" from children:	
extended hours kindergarten	76.0%
mobile kindergarten services	60.0%
parent run playgroup	45.3%
home-based visitor program	29.3%
toy library	28.0%
Kindergarten of the Air	21.3%

It seems clear that a large percentage of parents who responded to the survey (76%) wanted their children to attend some kind of sessional kindergarten as opposed to a range of other preschool services in spite of the nominated shortcomings. This may be because parents know, and are familiar with, the role of this service; in addition kindergarten services may be preferred by a majority of parents because the service provides time away from the children, but this is only one factor in their preferring kindergarten, as other "parent present" programs such as playgroups, mobiles and home-based programs were popular with parents.

In addition while some 50% of parents perceive the home as being able to provide many of the benefits provided by the preschool the major shortcoming in the home based program, as seen by the parents, is the lack of peer-age company for their child.

In addition to these two major studies, the Department of Community Services (Victoria) conducted an investigation of the use of so-called "back to back" sessions in rural preschools in Victoria. "Back to back" sessions consist of the coalescing of two, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hour sessions into one extended five hour session, including a lunch time and rest program. The responses to the survey were received from parents in the Mallee, Wimmera, East Gippsland, Central Highlands, Loddon-Campaspe, Barwon and Goulburn regions, and indicated that the (illegal) practice of including at least one "back to back" program per week is widespread. These programs are perceived by both staff and local communities as being particularly relevant to rural communities and that more

regular attendance is achieved at preschool through the introduction of "back to back" sessions. The "plusses" included the potential to "staff share" to enable small centres to provide the opportunity for in-depth work by the teachers and children, plus the perception that it responded to community needs.

A later 1989 study carries out by the then School of Early Childhood was aimed at practising kindergarten teachers in the Mallee region to determine their perceptions of parents' needs and wishes in terms of a program and whether they would be prepared to change their existing programs to meet those perceived needs. Results are included in Table 3.

Table 3

Attitudes of Currently Employed Kindergarten Teachers to a Change in Program

Do you think parents want a change in program? Yes: 68% No: 32%			
What Program Do You Think Parents Want		What Are You Prepared To Offer?	
extended hours sessions	22.5%	extended hours	4.0%
back to back sessions	13.6%	back to back sessions	4.0%
"all day" programs	13.6%	"all day" programs	4.0%
earlier start	13.6%	earlier start	4.0%
don't know	36.0%	don't know	36.0%
		Can't do anything until regulations change	54.5%

Of the thirty seven teachers eligible to respond, only twenty two (just under 60%) returned their questionnaire. The majority of respondents (68%) have an early childhood qualification of three years or better. 13.5% possess a primary teaching qualification, and 9% have completed a two year TAFE Child Care course. Many of the respondents have vast experience in the children's services field, ranging from 31 years to 2 years. (The average is 14.5 years). The majority of Mallee workers have had experience in other rural regions in Victoria while some have had similar experiences in New South Wales and South Australia in addition.

Their reasons for applying for their present jobs vary but appear to be no different from the multitude of reasons offered by applicants in any children's services position, including availability, location opportunity to re-enter the work force, while their program objectives reflect a somewhat traditional view of the role of children's services. It is interesting to note that seven respondents (31.5%) perceived their present role as more demanding in terms of meeting the children's and parent's needs in an isolated situation. One teacher in a mobile van situation reports of having to "make do" in less than suitable environments.

Only 5 respondents (22.5%) reported cases of children travelling up to 30kms to attend a program and 4 respondents (18%) reported examples of one or two families travelling up to 40kms for a session. These figures do not discount the fact that many other families who live up to 40kms from a program may not be serviced at all, or may utilise a program offered by a non-respondent to this survey.

The teachers' reporting of the parents' perceptions of preferred programs make every interesting reading; 68% of the respondents reported that parents wanted a variation on the existing 2 ½ hour session per day; either by using extended hours, back to back sessions or "all day" programs. Three groups of parents had requested an earlier start to the day to fit in with their work arrangements or the travel constraints of the school bus while one group of parents wanted a 2 year old group. Clearly there are many parents in the Mallee region who had requested amendments to the existing sessional programs. Just as clearly, the vast majority of early childhood workers would like to make the changes that reflect those needs - only one respondent indicated that she was not prepared to change. However many respondents cited problems with the existing Children's Services Centres Regulations (bedding was a problem), but one respondent has developed a "unit" system whereby units of varying lengths of time up to 10 hours per week could be utilised by the parents. Other respondents indicated a desire to provide a kindergarten-sum-child care program but acknowledged constraints of funding, while some 54.5% suggest a change in the Regulations and/or official sanction of the notion of back to back sessions in order to meet parents' needs.

The final question in the survey concerned the need to cater for children and families who lived 40+ kms from a service and those who responded to this question (only 9, 40.5%) indicated a need for a similar kind of flexibility in centre-based programs (extended hours, back to back, all day programs) as well as the extension of the mobile kindergarten concept, so that vans could spend a whole day at one site.

The responses are predictable but reassuring; predictable in that isolated parents perceive a need to be offered viable alternatives to the 4 x 2 ½ sessions per week, and reassuring in that teachers recognise this need and have some definite ideas on the way in which these needs can be met.

In addition to these data gathering procedures from within the Mallee, members of the Working Party undertook two further tasks; they looked at Distance Education models, and visited Correspondence Schools in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Wellington (N.A.) These services ranged from "modified primary courses" to individually planned programs for each preschool aged child by qualified early childhood staff; and finally the Working Party established a Pilot Home Based Preschool Program in two areas, Kaniva and Sealake. In these centres, a declining preschool population had reduced each teacher's position to that of half time. CS(V) developed service agreements with the Committees of each of these kindergartens to permit the respective teachers a half time allocation to locate isolated four year old children who were not enrolled in kindergarten programs and to provide a "correspondence type" program for them. Verbal response from participating parents indicates an enthusiasm for the home based program per se, but a desire for group socialising experiences for the children plus visits from the teacher are requested as well.

Conclusion

The Interim Report of the Mallee Rural Preschool Services Investigation Project was tabled in May 1990. The Report makes the following statements:

1. There is strong support for preschool education in the Mallee region, although no one model or service can meet the needs of all eligible four year olds in the Mallee region. A mix of models should be available and an infrastructure which co-ordinates those models should be established;

2. Of the models investigated to date, some form of centre-based, extended hours kindergarten program and the travelling teacher service would appear to be the most useful models for small rural communities. This is supported by the parent responses to the surveys who see back-to-back or some form of extended hours program as a means of overcoming the difficulties of unsuitable session hours and the amount of travelling required. However there would need to be further investigation of the "back to back" model to ensure that it meets award and subsidy requirements and provides developmentally appropriate programs;
3. There was strong local support for mobile van and travelling teacher services. Both services are flexible and are considered to be appropriate to the "middle distance" characteristic of rural Victoria. However the travelling teacher service was considered the most cost effective by CS(V) because of its lower staffing and equipment requirements.
4. In districts where there were insufficient children (less than five) to form a viable group, either a correspondence program or a home-based program, as is currently being trialled, would be appropriate. It was further determined that it would be more cost effective to purchase materials from either New South Wales or New Zealand rather than establishing a Victorian Correspondence Pre School Unit.

However it should be noted that the home based program, as currently trialled in Sealake and Kaniva, has limited applicability in Victoria as such services increase rather than decrease the mother's time commitment to her children and fail to provide the time away from children which some parents would like.

Notwithstanding that, home-based programs may be appropriate for parents who wish to keep their young children at home or who seek an alternative lifestyle for themselves and their children. Home-based programs could have an augmenting and/or extending role in conjunction with travelling teachers, playgroups and mobile vans. This would require the development of an appropriate infrastructure to ensure maximum benefit was derived from all services used; and last but by no means least;

5. Teachers working in distance education, e.g. in back to back sessions, as travelling teachers, in mobile vans or as writers of correspondence programs or home-based materials are themselves professionally isolated and require effective professional support.

Caroline Hogg's innocent "a year of kindergarten-type experience in the year before school" has provided the catalyst to explore alternatives to the centre-based, sessional kindergarten program of Victoria. Hopefully it will provide an opportunity for all parents in Victoria to have the opportunity to make known their feelings about the existing programs and the way in which kindergarten can be relevant in a time of considerable social and economic change.

Implications for Professional Training

Development of both preservice and inservice training programs for early childhood workers need to take more account of the need for flexibility and creativity when planning children's services to ensure that the real, as well as the perceived needs of the community are met. In terms of working in rural and isolated areas early childhood teachers require an overlay of specialised skills and knowledge to augment their basic preparation, including strategies for networking within the community/human services, working with trained and untrained adults, developing parent education programs, preparing "packages" for parents and assisting parents to use natural materials to hand as stimuli for their children's learning. The ATEA (1990) report to the NBEET Working Party on Rural Education and Training has suggested three things; firstly, that specific teacher education institutions be identified to prepare teachers to work in rural areas; secondly, that practicum should take place in rural areas, and thirdly, that inservice programs for teachers in rural areas be given priority. While all these recommendations have resource implications, two facts are obvious;

many rural and/or isolated preschool programs are the responsibility of young and/or inexperienced graduates and the Mallee Preschool Project has demonstrated that the interplay of accessibility, affordability and appropriateness of programs are critical factors in providing the right mix of services for young children in these isolated areas. It only remains to be pointed out that one hundred percent provision of any service will always be a challenge in terms of cost effectiveness and to ensure that the Department of Community Services (Victoria) adheres to its policy of a year of "kindergarten type experience for all children in the year before school" by taking credence of parent's needs, parents' expectations, and parents' perceptions of a worthwhile service.

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