

forging a future for our children

mignonne breier



Free to be ...

The 'Free to be' symposium on early childhood education, held at the University of Cape Town recently, was a monumental event that thrilled many, astounded a few and is still a major talking topic in pre-school circles.

It brought together for three days more than 2 000 delegates from throughout the country, including

teachers, academics, parents and social, health and community workers. The majority were black.

The result was a vibrant event in which none of the realities of South African life could be avoided.

This was made clear, for example, on the final morning when proceedings came to a halt to make way for an unscheduled, soul-searching play called 'Isegazini' on the plight of domestic workers and the bonds they retain with the white children they raise.

As cast members explored their own experiences with words, dance and music, delegates clapped, cheered, wept, ululated. And when one actor told how she 'f... d off' out of a house where she was given food to eat on a dirty plate and told to eat it in an outside toilet, there was a roar of approval.

There could be no doubt that for the majority of delegates the play struck important chords. It dealt with an area that was touched on in workshops but not examined in depth: the role in early education played by black women who bring

up white children, often on less than a living wage.

For a few, however, the play was literally a bit close to home. One woman complained it 'stirred feelings that should have been left alone'. A few were irritated by the way it delayed subsequent workshops. (The piano could not be found just before the start, causing the play to extend beyond the tea-break into which it had been slotted.)

Others queried its relevance at a discussion on pre-primary education.

But then the 'Free to be' symposium was not just about education.

Its workshops covered a vast range of topics from story-telling and puppet-making to drug education and child abuse, from the effects on children of political violence to the role of early education in the political struggle.

Said Jinny Rickards, chairperson of the symposium's planning committee (and a Black Sash member): 'The aim of the symposium was to bring to public attention the fact that pre-school education and child care — I call it educate — is an area of great importance but is overlooked and in a state of crisis in this country.

'I did not want it to be an elitist, intellectual exercise. I'm glad it was a huge, circus-like event. I have been to many political rallies. It was the only rally that was a genuine microcosm of South Africa.'

It was an underlying irony of the symposium that the bulk of the delegates represented that section of South Africa's population with the least facilities and money for early education.

According to figures from the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU), given at a workshop at the conference, only 130 000 — about two percent — of the five million-odd black children of pre-school age in this country have a hope of a place in a pre-school.

Speakers exhorted delegates not to depend on the state to meet the crying need but to mobilise communities into taking responsibility themselves. Various suggestions were offered including:

- Childminding schemes in which groups of childminders are guided by supervisors and

committees that allow for parent participation.

- Home-based education programmes whereby parents — many of them at home with their children because they cannot find work and cannot afford crèche fees — are trained to teach their own pre-school children and make their own

Speakers emphasised the importance of parental involvement in pre-school education as a means to raise parents' own educational levels, boost their confidence and involve them in the broader liberation struggle, as they rise to meet the challenges of day-to-day problems.

They also looked ahead to a new non-racial South Africa and its needs. Educationist Neville Alexander told delegates about the Vumani Pre-School Project which he described as 'a call on all our children and people to sing together with one voice'. He said the project tries to 'bring together, in workshops, teachers and parents from various pre-schools to develop pre-school curricula that will prepare children for a non-racial democratic South Africa.

The project believes a common core of metaphors should be accessible to all in post-apartheid South Africa, he said. If all children learned the same stories, songs, proverbs and nursery rhymes, regardless of language, then in the long run communication between people of different language groups should be facilitated, using English or another common language as the *lingua franca*.

In a point made at the final session, Brother Neil McGurk, headmaster of Sacred Heart College, Johannesburg, spoke of the way in which whites were having to change in this country and said the transformation was painful.

'For some of the whites who attended the symposium it was a transformational experience to be in that set up,' Jinny Richards said.

Others, like the Black Sash members who attended, marvelled at the goodwill, friendliness and hope that prevailed throughout the three days and simply revelled in the experience. □

transforming a life

lesley greensmith

It began on 15 May 1986 — a particularly miserable, cold day at the Port Elizabeth advice office. There was nothing much we could do for the majority of the hungry and depressed people desperately needing work.

Towards the end of the morning, Mellisango Johnson, aged 38, came in. Through an interpreter he told me he was angry and bitter he had been released from prison 13 days earlier after serving a two-year sentence for a crime he did not commit.

During his time in prison he had lost his job and his home and was now totally destitute, without food, shelter or even sufficient clothes to keep warm. Mr Johnson had been convicted of culpable homicide. At his trial he had had no legal representation and was sentenced to four years' imprisonment. He was unable to read and write and was very depressed. As he was not very articulate he was not able to tell me what he wanted me to do, or how I could help him. His immediate need was food, so the first thing I did was to ask a local church to supply him with a food parcel. All I could get out of Mr Johnson was that he was angry. 'I didn't do it!' kept coming through.

Wanting to show him that I sympathised, but really feeling there was nothing to be done, I phoned a sympathetic advocate at the Legal Resources Centre.

Jeremy Pickering listened to the story and like me was sympathetic but pessimistic. However, despite a busy schedule Jeremy asked me to send Mr Johnson over and he would see him out of compassion and in an attempt to explain the situation to him.

The case went out of my mind, as I was caught up with other problems. A few weeks later I received a call from a jubilant Jeremy telling me that he had a case — as it turned out, a very good

case indeed. Upon investigation Jeremy had found out that while Mr Johnson was in prison he had lodged a 'jail appeal' and had been granted leave to appeal by a Supreme Court judge. This jail appeal came before the Supreme Court on 18 May 1984: it was upheld and the conviction and sentence were set aside on that day. But the court decision was not acted upon and Mellisango Johnson was kept in prison for a further two years!

In a letter to the Minister of Justice claiming R150 000 damages, the Legal Resources Centre said that despite Mr Johnson's being entitled to release from prison immediately, he was held until 2 May 1986 — two years later. Mr Johnson, being unable to read or write, had asked a fellow prisoner to fill in the forms for his appeal. These were then given to a sergeant at St Albans Prison. He was then told he could appeal but had to get his own attorney. As he was in no position to instruct an attorney and had heard nothing else about his appeal, he presumed the whole thing had fallen through.

At no time during his imprisonment did he hear whether his appeal would be heard, that it had been heard or the outcome.

To cut a long story short — after legal wrangling Mr Johnson decided to accept an offer of compensation of R50 000 in an out-of-court settlement by the Minister of Law and Order. It may have been a fortune for Mellisango Johnson, but debatable whether it was worth several years of his freedom. The Legal Resources Centre arranged that Mr Johnson obtain expert advice on how to invest his money.

A happy ending to a sad story; but is this the tip of the iceberg? However, it is an encouraging case for all advice office workers.

Just keep trying, sometimes it pays off — handsomely. □