

CHAPTER FIVE

AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

According to Dr Lockwood Smith (Personal communication, 1992) international research concerning early childhood education has been influential in the development of the 'Parents as First Teachers' programme in Aotearoa.

As discussed earlier practice can not be viewed in isolation from theory. In order to gauge the assumptions underpinning educational policy it is necessary to ascertain the theoretical foundations upon which it is based. Identifying theoretical constructions involves researching those international programmes that have impacted on the advancement of 'Parents as First Teachers' in this country.

Two American early childhood programmes 'Head Start' and 'The Missouri Project' will be discussed within this chapter, the intention of which is to provide a historical background to the development of 'Parents as First Teachers' as an educational programme in Aotearoa.

HEAD START: A BRIEF BACKGROUNDING

In the early 1960s America was 'awakened' to "the other America" in which was estimated that 35 million people were living in poverty. Studies initiated by the Kennedy administration exposed that poverty was widespread throughout the country and was "threatening the nations social and economic well-being" (Zigler & Valentine, 1979).

The American Head Start programme was conceived in 1964, in a time that the State and academics were focusing on poverty, the "enemy of the human race" (ibid.). Headstart has been described by many as "an idea whose time had come" (Zigler & Anderson, 1979). Psychologists, such as Benjamin Bloom actively rejected fixed notions of Intelligence and dominant hereditarian theories of the time, promoting that a childs environment plays a major role in their intellectual development. According to Zigler & Valentine (1979), Bloom advanced a notion of "critical period", the first five years in which he concluded the most rapid intellectual growth occurred. This work became influential in the formation of social policy concerning child development, including Head Start. Head Start became an instrument in the "War on Poverty" by producing a framework for the implementation of practices based upon environmental theories, with education being viewed as an "antidote to poverty" (ibid.).

As a programme Head Start focused on the belief that early intervention is beneficial to the culturally disadvantaged/

deprived child and is based on the 'culture of poverty' notion that expressed intergenerational reproduction of the deprived state of the child's environment (Washington & Oyemade 1987, Ross 1979). It was assumed that children of the 'poor' were deficient in the knowledge and skills required to achieve, with their language forms being defined as 'impoverished' (Mitchell, J., 1982).

Valentine (1979) described an analogy between environmental deprivation and sports that illustrates clearly the dominant beliefs surrounding Head Start. "Poor" children, she contended were 'handicapped' before entering the school system, they were described as standing back from the 'starting line' and as a consequence did not commence their schooling on an equal footing. The basis of Head Start was, therefore, to provide a programme that would interrupt the deprivation cycle by intervening in intelligence, language and malnutrition 'problems' and thus compensating for the child's disadvantaged background and preparing the child for their movement into the school environment (ibid.).

Reflecting on Head Start Zigler and Anderson noted

"At a time that the War on Poverty and the Head Start program were created, the stereotypic view of poverty and the environmental view of its cure prevailed. The stereotype of the economically disadvantaged family was so bleak that it made intervention seem the obvious solution. The environmentalists' case for the power of enrichment was so strong that intervention seemed a simple solution as well. Bloom's discovery of the brief critical period in which intervention could be accomplished filled program planners with a sense of urgency. The ensuing rush to produce programs to enrich the environments of the poor through education overrode

the need for research data on which to base these intervention strategies."
(Zigler & Anderson,1979:9)

Consequently, they noted, Head Start was established in a context of "naive environmentalism".

Baratz & Baratz (1970) contend that the basic assumptions of the Head Start programme is consistent with deficit paradigms, based upon a social pathology model which established white middle class American behaviour and values as the norm against which all people were measured. The belief that those who did not adhere to such norms were "culturally bereft" significantly influenced the development of Head Start.

Jacquelyn Mitchell (1982), a African-American woman involved as a teacher in the Head Start programmes described the ways in which the children she was to teach were constructed

"I was "given" a set of beliefs about the background of the children I would teach...I was also told what to expect in the homes I would visit: black mothers would be uneducated; strict disciplinarians; absent fathers would be the norm; books would be rare; and the children would be inattentive, hyperactive, and demanding. I was taught that the black child's environment hindered learning because it lacked intellectual stimulation. But I was also warned that black children were overwhelmed by other stimuli-too much music, too much noise, too many people. Black children, it seemed, didn't have enough of anything except music, noise and people-and they had too much of those."
(Mitchell,J.,1982:30)

The 'poor' were homogenised as a single entity and no regard was given to ethnic, cultural, regional and economic differences. Mothers were constructed as incompetent and there existed generalised assumptions regarding the child's environment consistent with deficit theories (Zigler & Valentine,1979).

The failure of Head Start to make any major impact on the educational achievement of the 'culturally deprived' brought challenges to the theoretical foundations of the programme which, in turn, highlighted the inadequacies of compensatory programmes (Mitchell 1982, Smith, L 1986). According to Scarvia Anderson compensation education is "counterproductive" in its avoidance of wider structural influences on educational achievement.

"It [compensatory education] seems to stem, on the one hand from the kinds of motivation Winschell (1970) describes - prejudice, do-goodness, conscience - salving and maintenance of the status quo - and, on the other hand, from a reluctance to tackle the larger project of revamping our entire educational structure." (Anderson, S.B., 1973:205)

Head Start, as a compensatory programme focused specifically on attempting to change the 'victim' to fit the established norm rather than providing analysis that encompassed wider structural influences and the need to "revamp" the education system.

Critiques of Head Start were not however located purely in the exposing of its underlying assumptions. Psychologist Burton White (1979) contends the failure of Head Start derives from the programmes interest being one of focusing solely on compensation, to aid childrens development, rather than on the prevention and treatment of the 'deficiencies' (ibid.). White gave little regard to the analyses of the deficit mode of Head Start. Instead what was required, in his view, was a programme that commenced at birth, in order to provide the child with their best possible start in life, that programme was to be 'The Missouri project'.

THE MISSOURI PROJECT

The Missouri 'New Parents as Teachers' programme began in 1981, sponsored by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The programme was based upon the work of Burton White and his findings from 'The Harvard Preschool Project' research. The aim of the Harvard Preschool project was to obtain knowledge that would be developed into a programme that would help all children to achieve the best possible start in life. Initial research focused upon preschool children that White and his team determined were "most likely to succeed". When parents of these children had another child the research team observed and recorded the experiences and child-rearing techniques employed. This data combined with child developmental theories (Piaget, Hunt, Ainsworth) formed the basis for the development of information and support programmes for parents, which Meyerhoff and White contend were "our model of an ideal parent preparation and support program" (Meyerhoff & White, 1986).

In the 1970s a concerted effort was made by the Missouri Department of Education to develop an awareness of the benefits of a strong foundation for children in their first years of life and the potential "damaging effects" of poor parenting. Conducive to the environmental theories of the time, it was argued that steps needed to be taken to redress the effects of home environments that lacked support and stimulation for children in their formative years (Mo.Dept. Elementary and Secondary Education, 1990).

Arthur Mallory, Commissioner of Education in Missouri (1985), maintains the Missouri project evolved from the research evidence presented by Burton White that emphasised learning experiences the first three years were "too consequential to be ignored". The Missouri project was developed with it's brief being to

"Assess the value of high quality Parent Education on the skills of new parents need to enhance development of their children from birth to three years of age"
(Pfannenstiel and Seltzer 1989:1)

The project is premised on the belief that the enhancement of parenting skills could have significant benefits for a child's development, with a particular focus on the first three years of their lives. The objectives of the NPAT programme was to

- (i) provide age appropriate information on child development
- (ii) help parents increase skills as observers of their child
- (iii) provide guidance to promote the child's development in language, social & motor skills and intellectually. (ibid.)

Four districts were chosen as research areas and the 380 participating families were self-selected, along with random samples being added to ensure characteristics of both "socio-economic advantage and at-risk factors" occurred with equal frequency in the NPAT and comparison groups. The sample consisted of a varied proportion of "economically deprived", working class and middle class families, however the percentage of 'minority' families was low, all were first time parents (ibid.).

The methods utilised within the programme included monthly home visits by Parent educators, all of whom were trained in child

development and parent education, periodic developmental and health screenings, monthly group meetings at parent resource centres and the distribution of information pertaining to child growth and development.

In their evaluation of the programme Pfannenstiel and Seltzer noted NPAT children consistently scored higher than the comparison group and the nationally normed group on all measures of intelligence, achievement, language ability, verbal ability and auditory comprehension. Those children assessed as being 'at risk' by Parent educators performed more poorly on all measures than those children that were not considered to be 'at risk'. Furthermore, they established that NPAT parents scored higher on four of the six knowledge scales. What was more significant in this was that NPAT parents failed to score higher on scales related to "knowledge of intellectual development", therefore increased knowledge did not necessarily relate to childrens 'improved ability'. Finally, according to Pfannenstiel and Seltzer, the "single most important aspect" of the NPAT programme was identified as "the high quality parental involvement with the parent educator during home visits" . 'Quality' of parental involvement was found to be the most crucial mediating factor related to childrens ability, with those parents most likely to be evaluated as providing 'high quality' participation being older parents with higher educational levels, two-parent households, and those families with no 'at-risk' characteristics" (ibid.).

In 1983 the Missouri State Governor called for written submissions from heads of State agencies outlining estimates of savings that could be made within their departments due to the implementation of such a programme on a wider scale. Departments highlighted savings in a wide range of areas including the reduction of

"the high incidence of abuse and neglect in early childhood reported by the prison population...[and savings in the cost of] remedial and special education services for children who lacked a stimulating, supportive home environment in the formative early years".

(Mo. Department of Elementary & Secondary Education 1990:4)

Such arguments provided economic justification for the further expansion of the NPAT programme and the 1984 legislation for mandatory provision of services in all School districts in Missouri.

The expansion of NPAT allowed for statewide implementation and the designation of the programme as "the model for parent education" by the Missouri Commissioner of Education, which led to the extension of the programme to all parents under the title of 'Parents as Teachers' (Mo. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1990).

Very little literature concerning NPAT and PAT is available within Aotearoa. That which is accessible derives directly from proponents of the two programmes and a commissioned executive evaluation report which Sarah-Eve Farquhar (1990) notes "suffers from the appearance of being tailor written to convince its

American sponsors and politicians of its value". However, despite scant attention given to the projects, academics involved in early childhood education, in Aotearoa, have begun to call into question the theoretical foundations of the programmes.

Farquhar (1990) contends the theoretical frameworks and methodologies employed within the programmes are highly questionable, highlighting particularly the use of standardised tests and IQ testing as inappropriate measures of child development. As I have discussed earlier (refer Chapter 1) standardised testing is premised upon a belief that there exists a norm against which children can be compared and evaluated. Such a 'norm' derives from dominant definitions and is constructed to serve the interests of those that hold the power to define, and control, what is considered appropriate knowledge.

The development of NPAT by Burton White is clearly premised upon what he perceives to be appropriate child developmental stages and appropriate knowledge for parents. His selection of participating families for the Harvard Preschool project was based upon those children who, White states,

"by anyone's definition and in everyone's opinion were most likely to succeed... they all shared intellectual, linguistic and social skills that clearly set them apart from their average and below-average peers."
(Meyerhoff & White, 1986:).

White assumes there exists a universal agreement regarding firstly, what skills are necessary for 'success' and secondly, what is defined as 'success'. Furthermore his methodology is located within a positivist paradigm that espouses 'success' is

a universal and measurable state, an assumption which fails to accommodate the complex and varied ways in which 'success' is constructed by different groups within society.

Implicit within the Missouri project is a theme of social control. The NPAT and PAT programmes are instruments by which to ensure particular 'desired' characteristics are transmitted to children in their 'formative' years, which will in turn provide savings in areas such as delinquency, unemployment, health and prisons. Such an intent is clearly indicated in the call for estimates of predicted savings by State departments and in the following statement by the State Governor

"It's [The Missouri project] certainly more cost effective for us to catch these difficulties early than it is to try and remediate them later on. Ultimately, in the long run, this is a sound investment which has high return and as a result will be a low expense item, in our judgement."
(Ashcroft, J., 1988:video)

The Missouri project, like Head Start, focuses upon the correction of environmental deficiencies, which in this case is emphasises parental participation and involvement with their children. It is hypothesised that improved child development and potential for success can be attained through intensive parenting programmes. Parents are identified as requiring specific training, education and where necessary change. These aspects are determined and defined by "experts" in the form of Parent educators who assess parenting skills and design what they believe to be appropriate programmes which they in turn 'deposit' (Freire 1972) into parents and children.

Again, as with its Head Start predecessor, the theoretical foundations can be located within cultural deprivation theories that operate at the level of the individual and her/his environment and neglect the ways in which structures and institutions are constructed within frameworks that serve to benefit dominant interest groups. Such theorising fails to accommodate any analysis of structural considerations and disregards the processes involved in how definitions of 'good' parenting, appropriate child development and 'success' applied within the programmes is based upon, and legitimates, assumptions that derive from dominant group values and invisibilises the values, beliefs and cultural constructions of subordinate groups.

SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an overview of two American educational projects: Head Start and the Missouri Project. These programmes, it is argued, provide the bases for the development of Parents as First Teachers in Aotearoa.

Head Start originated as an 'answer' to the educational underachievement of 'minority' groups in America. Located primarily in environmental theories it was constructed to compensate for 'deficiencies' in the family background, which were perceived as barriers to educational success. Constructed within dominant group epistemologies it was believed that those who did not operate within the same world view were 'culturally

disadvantaged'. Head Start was therefore a programme based fundamentally in 'deficit' theories and 'victim blaming' scenarios.

The Missouri project is clearly a follow-on from Head Start. It developed out of a belief that the key weakness in the Head Start programme was that it started too late, that childrens future educational was determined within the first three years of their lives. Furthermore, it contended that educational underachievement could be viewed as a result of 'poor' parenting. Definitions of what constitutes 'good' parenting and 'success' are based entirely within dominant group constructions and therefore the discourses surrounding the Missouri project have also promoted the notions of 'cultural disadvantage' and 'cultural deprivation'.

The underlying assumptions of both Head Start and the Missouri project are concerned with changing the child in order for them to move comfortably into 'mainstream' educational institutions. These assumptions carry a 'taken for granted' belief that social structures, such as education, are neutral sites which cater equitably for all. Such assumptions and beliefs ignore the ways in which educational structures are constructed within particular cultural capital and also marginalise acts of resistance as 'deviant' behaviour. Therefore maintaining existing unequal power relations and conserving the status quo.