

Getting Ready For School: Project Keiki

Belen Ongteco

The first national goal for education addresses the need for all children to "start school ready to learn". Hawaii's educational goals specify that by the year 2000, all children entering kindergarten or first grade will not only be ready but also eager to learn (Hawaii State DOE, 1990). A national survey of 7,000 kindergarten teachers, including approximately 150 Hawaii teachers, conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that more than one third of American children and 47% of Hawaii children come to school unprepared to learn. The problems include "emotional immaturity", "lack of language skills" and "lack of social confidence". Poor language skills was cited as the greatest deficiency (DOE Update, December, 1991). Project Keiki is an attempt to prepare three-to-five-year-old children from non-English speaking homes to get ready for school.

Project Keiki is a federally-funded special alternative instructional project under ESEA Title VII. Students, numbering 225, from eight public elementary and two private preschools in Hawaii are participating. The public schools are Helemano, Pearl Harbor, Ewa, Waimanalo, King Kamehameha III, Princess Nahienaena, Keaau and Pahala. The private preschools are Rainbow and Hana Day Care. The project serves preschool and kindergarten students of limited English proficiency who are dominant speakers of Ilokano, Samoan, Tongan, Hawaiian or Hawaii Creole English. Immigrant children, children of Hawaiian ancestry, and Hawaii-born children of immigrant parents are represented in the population served. The goal is to facilitate those children's acquisition of language, cognitive and social skills.

The project provides developmentally appropriate activities for preschool children and supplementary language support services to kindergarten students who are limited English proficient. The suggested activities address physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth through an integrated approach. Significantly absent in those activities are workbook exercises, worksheets to fill out, flashcards and adult-made models of art products for children to copy, as the project believes in learning through active exploration, play and interaction with peers, adults and materials. Interest areas are set up for children to be able to direct their own play activities. A wide variety of multicultural and non-stereotyping materials are included to enhance each child's self-esteem and strengthen the bonds with his/her family while learning about and appreciating the ways of others.

A major characteristic of the project is the close working relationship among parents, teachers, project staff and other community resources. Parents or any adult family member, relative, babysitter or trusted neighbour accompany the preschool children and participate in the learning activities in school at least twice a week for three-hour sessions each. Approximately 80 parents and/or care-providers come to the classes. Parents are encouraged to follow up those classroom activities with suggested educational experiences at home.

Since most of the parents are new to the school themselves, accompanying the children to class is a non-threatening opportunity for them to get acquainted with the school culture, system, and expectations. While waiting for the children, the parents are provided with opportunities for personal growth through child-watching, participation in the activities, learning parenting skills, and acquiring literacy skills.

Besides bringing the children to school and taking them home, parents bring snacks. This provides an opportunity for them to learn about nutritious, healthy snacks. Juices and fruits are preferred to soda, candies and chips. Parents are asked to participate in hands-on projects. Having come from other countries,

they find doing arts, crafts and playing manipulative games new and exciting. Some of them experience these for the first time.

Parents are valuable resources in ethnic rhythmic movements, songs, storytelling, poems and other multicultural activities. As parents become more comfortable they suggest other activities which are added to the teachers' repertoire of developmental activities.

As parents get together, they develop their own support network. They begin to discuss common problems related to child care, discipline and other areas of interest. In some schools, parents who have infants sometimes bring them to school and take turns in looking after the infants.

In addition to knowing more about the school and its procedures, parents learn skills which reinforce what the children learn in school. They learn self-control, patience and ways of interacting with their children. One of the fathers, for example, when asked what he learned by coming to Project Keiki classes, said that he found out he did not have to say "no" all the time to his child. Real discipline comes from within the child who will do what he/she is told to because he/she is ready to do so. They learn that speaking the native language with their children does not retard the children's learning of English. In fact, speaking the native language rather than a non-standard version of English is preferable and will help the children to become bilingual in English and in the home language.

Some parents gain enough confidence to enrol in adult classes to learn English, mathematics, computer literacy, complete their degrees and even consider going into teaching.

Project Keiki has provided an opportunity for children and their parents to spend some quality time together not only at home but also at school for their mutual educational benefits. For most, this is the only chance for these language minority children to have some kind of formal preschool training before entering kindergarten. This is the first time for their parents to set foot in school. It has served to educate the parents in a non-threatening and culturally-appropriate manner since they learn by observing, modelling and participating. The project has shown that language minority parents can be actively involved in their children's education in a meaningful manner and that they can help to prepare their children to start school ready and eager to learn.

Project Keiki is administered through the Languages Section, General Education Branch, Office of Instructional Services at 189 Lunalilo Home Road, 2nd Floor, Honolulu, Hawaii 96825.

References

Hawaii State Department of Education. *Hawaii Goals for Education*. 1990.

Hawaii State Department of Education. "Carnegie Foundation Study Says Half of Hawaii's Children Not Ready for School," *Update* Dec. 19, 1991.

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