

A Job to Do

by Jane Carroll McRae
Northwestern Regional Library

Tinkertoys and whimmy diddles are not usually considered to be proper subjects for serious research, but in the Northwestern Regional Library System, based in Elkin at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, they are under the scrutiny of librarians, professors, deans and assorted workers with children.

In a project funded by the United States Office of Education's Higher Education Act, Title II-B, for Library Research and Demonstration, the library is experimenting with ways to bridge the educational gap for children who are left out of the state's Kindergarten and Head Start programs.

The target of the project is the parent.

"No amount of money or buildings and equipment can overcome the handicap a child has if his parents are not educationally able to give him the start in life that he needs," says Dr. Henry Drennen, Coordinator of Library Research and Demonstration for the Office of Education.

The major objective of the research is to locate these parents and take instruction into the homes to help to provide the materials and the skills needed.

Many public libraries are beginning to stock certain toys of educational value for use by pre-school children. This project

goes a step further and sends trained teachers into the homes to help the parents to know what can reasonably be expected of their children.

Heading this project is Mrs. Barbara East, graduate of Winston-Salem State University in the field of Early Childhood Education. Three others of her staff also hold teachers' certificates in the early grades.

"Parents always have been the first and most important teachers of their children," says Mrs. East. "Until we lift the level of parenting, we cannot hope to make a dent in North Carolina's educational problems."

Many speakers at the Governor's Conference on Reading emphasized the necessity for tackling the problems of non-reading and indifferent parents. Only one father in five has finished high school in the Northwestern Region. Nearly a million adults in North Carolina are functionally illiterate. These parents are the main target of the library's project, though any child who is left out of all programs is considered to be deprived.

Parents are rounded up by library van and brought to nearby meeting places for monthly sessions in home training for chil-

dren. The van also rounds up the children and takes them to a nearby public library each week for a group experience and exposure to library services for children.

Parents are given a toy, shown its teaching qualities, then allowed to keep it until the next visit of the teacher. The teacher then checks the child's progress and leaves another toy.

One overalled father was heard to say, "Why, Law, if I had known what I was supposed to be teaching my boy, I would have been doing it all along."

There are fathers teaching their sons how to tie the laces in their sturdy high top shoes. There are mothers playing games of matching colors and sizes and shapes with buttons, boxes and cans. There are baby sitters becoming excited about teaching their charges to count and to sort.

Of the two hundred children involved in the project, groups have been selected for sample testing by a team from North Carolina Central University under the direction of Miss Marian Ricks, Director of the Early Childhood Library Specialist Program. Using the "Tests of Basic Experiences" (TOBE), General Concepts (Level K) published by McGraw-Hill, as the major vehicle, she works with children at three-month intervals to determine the rate of progress and the areas that need special attention.

Craftsmen, who abound in the mountains of North Carolina, are entering into the spirit of the project. There is Dennis Martin, who was able to make wooden trucks, beads for stringing, and wooden puzzles two inches thick so that they stand up and make a toy. These "home grown" toys are considerably cheaper and sturdier than anything that can be bought on the market.

"A major result toward which we are

working is to find these parents using the library and making its services a part of raising their families," says Mrs. East. "We are hoping for life-time results, not just short term achievements."

The project is in its second year and is beginning to see results that convince the Advisory Council that public libraries can indeed be an integral part of the educational team in bridging the gap for preschool children.

Librarians and workers with children are invited to observe this project in action and determine for themselves their own techniques in helping to lift the educational level in North Carolina.

As one father said, "I can't play checkers today, boys. I've got a job to do. Me and my boy are learning how to read."

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