

## CHAPTER 4: THE PREPRIMARY CHILD

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter different characteristics of preprimary children are discussed. It is important to know what preprimary children are like before a programme can be designed for them. There are many factors to consider and these have been discussed under the headings of the psychological, cognitive, physiological and social characteristics of the five-year-old. However, it is not enough to know what they are like, it is also important to know the ways in which they learn best as well as the roles that the learning situation and the learning programme play in their learning. Lastly, different approaches to preschool syllabus and preschool language syllabus design have been discussed.

### 4.2 WHAT A PREPRIMARY CHILD IS LIKE

#### 4.2.1 Psychologically

According to Freud, children from 5 years up to puberty are in a latent phase. This phase is characterised by gender identification of the parent of the same sex. Children learn gender roles through *play* and *imitation* (Louw, 1994:58).

Erikson, in his theory of development, divides the normal human course of life into eight stadia that are each characterised by a crisis in which the individual has to position himself between two opposing poles. The five-year-old has to position himself between initiative and guilt.

*Three strong developments help at this stage, yet also serve to bring the child closer to his crisis: (1) he learns to move around more freely and more violently and therefore establishes a wider and, so it seems to him, unlimited radius of goals; (2) his sense of language becomes perfected to the point where he understands and can ask about many things just enough to misunderstand them thoroughly; and (3) both language and locomotion permit him to expand his imagination over so many things*

*that he cannot avoid frightening himself with what he himself has dreamed and thought up. Nevertheless, out of all this he must emerge with a sense of unbroken initiative as a basis for a high and yet realistic sense of ambition and independence (Erikson, 1980:78).*

The above-mentioned theories and descriptions of the development of the five-year-old is summarized by Louw (1994:243-244) in terms of the following developmental tasks:

- The child should master fine and rough motor skills in order to gain more control over his body.
- The preschooler should learn to eat and clothe himself, handle different objects and know the function of those objects.
- Preprimary children should learn to communicate their needs and to make use of language in their social interaction.
- The five-year-old should learn what is expected of him in his family and in the wider community. He should also learn to conduct himself in relationships in a socially acceptable manner.
- During this phase, the child should also internalize the moral standards of the community he lives in.
- The self-concept of the child undergoes continual change during this phase as he is constantly faced with new life experiences and his thoughts become more sophisticated.
- The preschooler becomes more aware of his gender and different gender roles and will also play with gender specific toys.
- Preprimary children are more aware of the feelings and emotions of their parents, brothers and sisters and other people and they learn to interpret these emotions.
- The child learns self-control during this phase and is better able to control his more intense emotions.
- Norms, rules and cultural values are learned during this phase and a sense of right and wrong is inculcated in the child.

#### 4.2.2 Cognitively

Piaget's theory of the cognitive development of children is probably the most widely accepted theory in this regard. According to Piaget, the five-year-old is in the Preoperational Phase.

*The distinguishing characteristic of the Preoperational child is the development of "symbolic functioning." Symbolic functioning is the ability to make one thing represent a different thing which is not present. The degree of correspondence between the two can vary from highly concrete to highly abstract. (Ault, 1977:47)*

Similar to the psychological development of the five-year-old, language also plays a very important part in his cognitive development. According to Ault (1977:49), the child starts using language symbolically during the Preoperational Phase as:

*the child describes activities of the past and understands some references to the future. His use of words is more conventional (though by no means perfectly adult-like) and comes to control more of his behaviour. One function of language is to teach the child to organize or classify his environment. The Preoperational child thus begins to learn about the formal properties of classes.*

Louw (1994:258) sums up the development of the symbolic function (which has to do with mind pictures) in the following manner:

- *Postponed imitation* where the preschooler is able to imitate a role model which is not present at the moment.
- *Symbolic play* where the preprimary child uses a concrete object that symbolizes something else.
- The child begins to make *drawings*.
- The five-year-old is able to form *mind pictures*, which means the parent or teacher can refer to objects that the child saw at a previous time and the child will be able to see those objects in his mind's eye.
- *Verbal recollection* happens when the child makes a sound (e.g. 'woof') associated with an object (e.g. a dog) that is not visible at that moment.

- The development of *language*. This is the most important example of the semiotic function as it is used to represent objects, actions and thoughts.

Another very important characteristic of the preschooler as observed by Piaget and Inhelder is that of egocentrism (quoted by Louw, 1994:259). The five-year-old is not mentally able to place himself in someone else's position in order to look at a certain situation from another perspective. This can also be observed in the child's language usage. An example of this is when the child speaks to himself without wanting to communicate (which is called private speech). Another example can be seen when children repeat certain phrases over and over again or when they play next to one another, but they conduct their own separate conversations. (These conversations are called collective monologues.)

Krouse (1988:7) mentions the importance of knowing these characteristics when teaching preschool children, as the young child is the centre of his universe:

*Learning content should firstly be about the child himself, his family, his home, his belongings, his friends and what he eats and does. Stories are related to what he experiences and broaden his understanding of life. For example, the story "The Three Bears" is about bears, but, more than that, it is about a family, their home, the meal they are about to have, their belongings and their fear of an intruder.*

Cognitively, the Preoperational child "uses symbolic functions and begins to understand classes but he fails to compare parts to wholes, does not order serial quantities well, and does not conserve number. Piaget attributes these limitations in thinking to the child's inability to decenter his attention" (Ault, 1977:61).

However, the Piagetian theory has been criticised for the fact that it underestimates the ability of the young child to analyse (Antonini-Boscán, 1988:2):

*In the area of perception, the research of Kemler (1982, 1983) has quite convincingly shown that analytic perception is not entirely absent in preschool children and that their holistic mode of perception seems to be more a matter of preference than of inability to analyze.*

Another area in which preschool children may be more sophisticated than stated by the Piagetian theory is that of logical reasoning:

*The studies done by Trabasso, 1977 show that the inability to make transitive inferences (if  $A=B$  and  $B=C$ , then  $A=C$ ) attributed to young children in the Piagetian model is a product of task-related variables which impose an undue load on a child's coding, retention and retrieval capacities. Trabasso's simplified tasks (as compared to Piagetian tasks) led him to conclude that 'the age and performance correlation disappears when one makes sure that the child understands and can remember the information critical to making inferences'*  
(Antonini-Boscán, 1988:3)

The Piagetian model may also have underestimated the memory and mnemonic strategies of the preschooler:

*Flavell, 1977 has used the term 'production deficiency' in describing the performance of young children in tasks related to the use of mnemonic strategies such as rehearsal. According to Flavell (1977:198), 'a child is said to have a production deficiency for a particular strategy if he fails to produce it on his own for reasons other than sheer lack of ability or skill to enact it properly.' He also says: '... the child is likely to exhibit a pattern of production deficiency with regard to the strategy. That is, he can and will use it if explicitly directed to do so, and using it benefits his memory in the expected fashion, but he does not use the strategy spontaneously, on his own initiative'*  
(Antonini-Boscán, 1988:3)

Schmid-Schönbein (1982:5-6) has identified some similar basic procedures that are followed by children when they acquire a language. These are:

- The child formulates generalizations and hypothesizes about the rules of the target language. This is apparently due to "an unconscious drive to find an orderly system governing what he hears" (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:5).
- The child then refines these rules when he is exposed to further language experiences. It is during this step that the child accommodates exceptions and irregularities in his language system.

- The next step is an extension of the second. The child not only limits his rule-making to single words or grammatical forms, but he will also grasp the rules for combining words into meaningful sentences for adjusting speech according to the person addressed and the specific situation in which the communication takes place.

However, this whole process “is virtually dependent on interaction with other human beings who speak the language to be learnt” (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:6). It is thus very important that the child receives correct, positive and reinforcing input.

### **4.2.3 Physiologically**

According to Krouse (1988:7), the preschooler’s attention span is very limited and he can therefore not concentrate on one activity for long. Any learning activities should thus be short and uncomplicated and should “aim at getting the child to respond spontaneously and with enjoyment in what he is learning” (Krouse, 1988:7).

Another characteristic of the preprimary child is that he learns best when most of his senses are involved (Krouse, 1988:7). Strickland (1985:98-99) says that the teacher has to be aware the child’s preferred “modalities, e.g., whether the child prefers an auditory, visual, or tactile mode”. Thus, when planning learning activities, it is important that the child will be able to see, hear, touch, taste and smell the object of his learning (where possible).

According to Louw (1994:276), preprimary children can recall visual input better than auditory input. It can thus be concluded that they should rather be stimulated visually, and audiovisually when the teacher wants them to remember what they have learned.

With regard to their sensory memories, five-year-olds register incoming visual input just as effectively as adults. However, the further processing of the information is not as effective, because they are less able to store the information in their short term memory (Louw, 1994:273).

Thus, they need help in processing and storing the information that they receive through their senses .

People's short term memory is usually determined by their memory span which can be defined as the greatest number of items which someone can repeat faultlessly and in the correct order. According to research by Dempster, the memory span of a five-year-old is four (Louw, 1994:273).

Long term memory can be divided into two different types of memory tasks, namely identification tasks and recollection tasks. In identification tasks, the person has to be able to judge whether something he is observing is identical or similar to what he has observed during a previous occasion. With regard to recollection tasks, the person has to be able to retrieve information which has been stored in the memory on a previous occasion (Louw, 1994:274). Research by Kagan, Klein, Haith and Morrison has shown that five-year-olds are able to recognize 12 pictures from 100, but that they struggle when asked to recall and name the 12 pictures they have seen. In the study by Kagan, Klein, Haith and Morrison four-year-olds could only name 2 or 3 of the twelve pictures (quoted by Louw, 1994:274). This indicates that the preprimary child doesn't have problems with identifying similar objects visually, but that they need help with mentally recalling information previously learned.

Lenneberg, in his book "Biological Foundations of Language", looks at the neurological aspects of language acquisition based on scientific studies. He concludes that it is possible to speak of a "critical period of language acquisition" which falls between the ages of 3 and 10 years (Lenneberg, 1967:179). One of the reasons for this critical period is the fact that cerebral lateralization becomes firmly established at puberty (Lenneberg, 1967:178). This means that cerebral dominance is established at the onset of puberty and that the right hemisphere of the brain is not involved in speech and language functions any more. It thus implies that children of the ages between 3 and 10 are able to make use of both hemispheres in the brain for their speech and language functions, and where "aphasia ensues with left lesion, it is possible to re-establish

language presumably by reactivating language functions in [the] right hemisphere” (Lenneberg, 1967:180-181).

According to Ellis (1996:107), though:

*The critical period hypothesis is an inadequate account of the role played by age in SLA, because this assumption was only partially correct. Only where pronunciation is concerned is an early start an advantage, and even then only in terms of success, not rate of acquisition.*

Neurologically, then, the preschooler has an advantage when acquiring a second language with regard to pronunciation, but not necessarily with regard to other aspects of the language. Certain language-specific skills, such as the precise ability to distinguish between sounds and to reproduce foreign sounds are more effective before than after the age of 10 (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:8). Empirical evidence has also shown that certain abilities for sound discrimination, recognition and intonation rapidly deteriorate after the age of 6. In the words of Schmid-Schönbein (1982:12):

*...children at kindergarten age can learn a foreign language. Accuracy in pronunciation is the outstanding skill which is acquired most speedily, and comprehension and active speaking does show satisfactory results when seen in relation to the actual teaching time.*

Studies on children acquiring a second language in a bilingual setting or in bilingual communities, have also shed more light on the cognitive ability of very small children. When the two parents each consistently speaks to the child in a different languages, the child is able to acquire both languages simultaneously. For the first two years, both languages are used by the child in combination when he communicates. However, at the end of the child's second year, towards the beginning of his third year, he starts to show a consciousness of both languages and from then on the acquisition of the two languages proceeds separately (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:7).

Schmid-Schönbein (1982:8) has come to the following conclusion:

*Children who grow up in a bilingual exposure are living proof to the claim that the human mind is able to build up not only one, but two,*

*and occasionally even three, complex language systems simultaneously  
- at a very young age and without formal teaching.*

#### **4.2.4 Socially**

Louw (1994:299) sums up the social developmental tasks of the preschooler in the following points: The preschooler should learn to:

- control his biological needs such as toilet habits;
- build on his previously acquired language skills;
- develop a conscience;
- develop an understanding of his social world;
- develop autonomy and initiative; and
- should display gender appropriate behaviour.

Although the development of language skills is only one of these tasks, it is implied in all of the above-mentioned social skills.

Furthermore, researchers are of the opinion that certain social mechanisms are present in all children - regardless of their culture and language (Louw, 1994:300). These are a desire to acquire affection, regard, acceptance and recognition, and a wish to avoid unpleasant emotions that are a result of rejection or punishment. All preschoolers also tend to imitate others and have a desire to be like those people that they have come to respect and adore - a process known as identification. Thus, when learning a second language, these mechanisms should be used to support the preschooler in his learning, rather than to hinder him.

De Witt and Booysen (1995:12) recognize further characteristics of the social development of the five- to six-year-old:

1. The child is dependent on adults, but is able to detach himself from his mother.
2. Preschoolers are friendly, although they are shy when it comes to strangers.
3. They prefer to play with children of their own age.

4. They tend to put the blame on others when something goes wrong.
5. Preschool children become conscious of their social responsibilities.
6. These children love to tease others.
7. They find it difficult to give up their turn or place for the benefit of others.
8. The preschooler starts to prefer the company of children of his own gender.
9. They prefer cooperative or ensemble play.
10. Preschoolers are able to be part of groups with five to seven other preschoolers in them.
11. These children understand rules easier and are able to recognize similarities in situations.
12. Human characteristics are given to non-living objects.
13. The child's observations still dominate his thoughts and emotions.
14. Preschoolers' interest in competition is usually stimulated around this time.

According to De Witt and Booyesen (1994:31), five-year-olds are content to play by themselves for long periods of time, although they also play with other children. They also enjoy fantasy games and prefer competition games to team games. Group games would still require the arbitration of an adult as the preschooler is still largely dependent on the approval of an adult.

As can be seen in all of the above-mentioned characteristics, play forms a very important part of the preschooler's social development and thus also his acquisition of language skills. Mildred Parten, in her study of the play of preschoolers has identified six types of play. These are summarized by Louw (1994:314):

1. *Uninvolved play*, where it is not obvious that the child is actually playing. However, he keeps himself busy with something that interests him, e.g. his own body, a chair or he just observes his environment.
2. *Solitary play*, where the child plays by himself with toys and doesn't show any intention of making contact with other children. He continues by himself, regardless of what the other children do.
3. *Spectator play*, where the child passes his time by observing other children playing. He talks with them, asks them questions and even gives suggestions, but he remains at a

distance from the group.

4. *Parallel play*, where the child plays independently alongside other children without playing with them. Thus, interaction doesn't take place.
5. *Associative play*, where the child plays with other children. Conversation is the most common activity, but they also borrow toys from one another or play with related toys, e.g. motor cars.
6. *Cooperative play*, where the children play together in a group working towards a common goal, e.g. making a product. Each child then has a certain responsibility and the preschoolers usually regard their group as exclusive with its own identity.

Sarafino and Armstrong have identified play in terms of its function in the total development of children and have identified four types of play (quoted by Louw, 1994:315):

- *Social affective play*, which is a simple type of game that mainly includes giving and taking. Usually only two children are involved in this game and teasing is included here.
- *Sensory stimulating play*, where the children 'play' with sensory experiences, e.g. sound, taste, rhythm, smells, textures and movements.
- *Enquiring play*, where the child moves from the sensory pleasure to the discovery or inquisitive type of game. Initially, the colour and form of blocks were the most important aspect, but now it becomes more important to discover what you can do with them.
- *Skill development play*, which includes free play where the child can correlate his own skills with those required by the game, but he can also alter the pace of the game according to his ability. Playing with educational toys would also fall into this category.

## 4.3 HOW THE PREPRIMARY CHILD LEARNS

### 4.3.1 The Learning Situation

According to Schmid-Schönbein (1982:5-8), there are basically three settings in which young children can learn a second language. These are the natural milieu, in bilingual families and

communities and second language teaching at an early age. For purposes of this dissertation, the focus is on the last, but the other settings may also play a small part in the second language acquisition of African preprimary children in South Africa.

#### 4.3.1.1 *The Natural Milieu*

Language acquisition usually takes place in this type of setting when there are few children around the learner who speak his mother tongue - "he will literally absorb the second language from his environment as a means of communication in play and in fight" (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:5). In this learning situation, though, the importance of corrective or positive reinforcements by language models cannot be overemphasized. These language models need to evoke in the child "the need for communication, and make the use of language a pleasant experience" (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:6).

#### 4.3.1.2 *Bilingual Families or Communities*

This setting is most commonly found in families where the mother and father have different mother tongue languages. It seems that if the parents stick to the rule of "one-person-one-language" (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:7), the child acquires two languages simultaneously. The dominant language of the child is dependent on the amount of exposure to the parents' languages, thus either language may become the dominant one for the child.

Many people have a problem with this type of language acquisition and the main criticism is that the child mixes the languages and will be even more confused when expected to acquire two languages at the same time. This appears to be true for the first two years of the child's life:

*in the initial stages bilingual children have a larger vocabulary from which they can choose than unilingual children. They do so freely without distinguishing between the two language systems; in fact they seem to 'weld' a new instrument, at least for an intermediate phase.*  
(Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:7)

However, more or less at the end of the child's second year he starts to use the two languages

separately. According to Schmid-Schönbein (1982:7), the child's consciousness of dealing with two separate languages usually starts early in the third year: "Increasingly, from then on, the learning of both languages proceeds separately, each one still being restricted to communication with the one person representing the respective language".

#### 4.3.1.3 *Second Language Teaching at an Early Age*

A perception exists among educators that second language teaching for preschoolers can follow the traditional pattern and setting of second language teaching as in primary schools and that only the contents can be adapted to a younger age group (Schmid-Schönbein, 1982:8). This, however, is not the most effective way to create a favourable setting for language acquisition of preschoolers. Schmid-Schönbein (1982:9) has identified six prerequisites for a setting for teaching a second language to young children. These are:

- a relaxed setting of emotionally warm personal links to children of this age in which a native or near-native language model relates well to the children.
- a setting which allows as much incidental learning as possible during the course of the day. This should at least be a small representation of the natural milieu.
- a setting that is attractive and play-oriented and that tempts the child to get involved and motivates him to communicate verbally in the second language.
- a setting that provides a model dialogue partner (such as a puppet) for the child which is fun to communicate with.
- a setting with no more than ten children that will ensure individual attention and instant, positive reinforcement.
- a setting that allows for inconspicuous repetition of what is heard and learnt.

These are the prerequisites for an ideal setting. However, it is very difficult to meet all of these prerequisites in the South African situation and specifically in a preschool setup in a township. As can be seen from the case studies that were done as part of this dissertation (cf. Chapter 6), most of the preschool teachers are not near-native models when it comes to speaking English. For some of them English is their third or fourth language. Furthermore, a setting of no more than ten

children is ideal, but in the preschools that were visited there were at least 25 children in the same class. When the children go home, they get no or very little exposure to English. This means that they are expected to learn a second language at school without much help from home. As the case studies continued it became more apparent that there is a tremendous need for an English programme and for the retraining of the teachers.

### **4.3.2 The Learning Programme**

According to Krouse (1988:1), the overall aims of teaching English as a second language should be the following:

The child should be able to:

- understand English when spoken at a normal tempo;
- speak the language fluently, correctly and spontaneously;
- read English;
- write English.

(The last two aims, however, would only start to receive attention in the first two years of primary school.)

It is also important to remember that the young child's success in acquiring English as a second language depends largely on his ability to adapt to the English language programme and the programme has to take into account the child's home life, his cultural grouping, his exposure to the second language and his socioeconomic background.

## **4.4 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO PRESCHOOL SYLLABUS DESIGN**

### **4.4.1 The Preschool Syllabus in General**

Cassidy et al. (1987:2) distinguish between ways in which a preschool syllabus can be designed. The first form of syllabus design derives educational objectives from certain chosen activities:

*For example, preschool teachers planning for the upcoming week may scan an activities book and choose an idea they want to try... Objectives for these activities are derived from beliefs about the benefits of the activity for a single child or a group of children (Cassidy et al., 1987:2)*

The second form of syllabus design uses the child as starting point and not the activity. The children's interests, developmental abilities, skills and learning style are first determined and then they are provided with developmentally appropriate activities (Cassidy et al., 1987:3).

The authors also discuss the child-centred curriculum and comments that this "approach allows us to plan for a specific child or group of children" (Cassidy et al., 1987:3). However, Cassidy et al. (1987:3) caution that this syllabus could be problematic if it fails to consider the experience, values and goals of the parents and teachers who make decisions affecting the children.

#### **4.4.2 Language Syllabus Design on Preschool Level**

Kaczmarek (1985:184) specifically focuses on language objectives within the preschool syllabus and proposes three possible models for the integration of specific language objectives in the total preschool curriculum. In the first model, instruction on specific objectives occur concurrently with instruction in special lessons. This means that the children will be practising a specific language structure within the designated language lesson, but it will be repeated and reinforced during other lessons in the daily programme such as free play or during the art lesson (thus, instruction in the natural environment). This could be regarded as a very structural approach.

In the second model, language instruction in the natural environment is delayed until the child has mastered a certain language structure in the language lesson. The child would not be expected to practise this structure during free play or the art lesson, until he/she is comfortable with using it during the language lesson.

The third model proposes that instruction on a specific language structure is only given in the

natural environment. The teacher would then have certain language objectives for the children during free play or the art lesson, but no formal instruction will be given during a language lesson.

#### 4.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter it can clearly be seen that preschoolers are not mere small adults or small school children. Even though Antonini-Boscan (1988:2-3) makes it clear that their cognitive abilities shouldn't be underestimated, preschoolers learn and perceive the world quite differently from adults or children of school going age.

Preschoolers are motivated differently - and this is a very important aspect in the acquisition of a second language. Furthermore, they have very unique qualities that can be utilized very effectively for quality learning. The importance of play in the life of a preschooler should never be disregarded and this is one of the great challenges for syllabus designers of preschool materials - to use play as an instrument to teach specific skills or content.

Although South Africa has many socioeconomic and political problems, especially when it comes to the life of African people in townships, there are also great opportunities to develop the language acquisition skills of the preschoolers. However, most of these opportunities can be found in the preschools and not in the children's homes. The importance of a second language programme for preschoolers in South Africa can therefore not be stressed enough.