Helping Isolated Rural Parents: The Home Tutor Support Program

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Abstract
The Home Tutor Support Program has developed as an educational
partnership between Charles Sturt University and the Broken Hill School
of the Air. The principle purpose of the program is to assist home
tutors implement the primary distance education materials for their
children. The characteristics of the home tutors and their specific
needs will be discussed. An overview of the program and its modular
structure will be provided and the reactions by the home tutors to the
modules will be included.

Introduction

Participation in primary education for children living on remote rural
properties is most frequently conducted at home. These children enrol
in a distance education school or centre and receive regular print
based correspondence materials. Either a parent (often the mother) or
a governess takes on a new, daunting and challenging role in
supervising their child's education:- the home tutor. The home tutor
usually has no or limited prior training in appreciating what this new
role entails (Taylor, 1993). Yet, as Tomlinson and Taylor (1984)
asserted 'Extensive fieldwork confirmed the notion that the education
program of the isolated child is dependent for its success on the
active involvement of the home tutor' (p. iii).

In an extensive review of the literature on home tutors, Boylan and
Squires (1996) concluded i) the home tutor has a central or pivotal
role to play in the education of the child; ii) the home tutor plays a
central intermediary between the distance education teacher and the
child; iii) the roles expected of the home tutor are complex and
varied; iv) the home tutor requires regular communication with the
distance education teacher to implement successfully the learning
materials; and v) there is an urgent need for specific programs to
train and support the home tutor in this essential education role.

Origins of the program

In late 1994, the principal of Broken Hill School of The Air contacted
Charles Sturt University with a request for assistance in developing a
program for their home tutors. In February 1995, discussions with the
home tutors were initiated during the Home Tutors Workshop at Broken
Hill School of The Air. The eighteen (18) participants were divided

into 4 groups and using a focus group method of generating ideas, issues and concerns each group listed their particular needs as home tutors. These group generated needs were collated and sorted into themes with the combined responses being presented to all participants in a second session. Here a modified Delphi technique was used to gain group consensus and prioritise their needs about the nature and focus of the program. After this second session the program outline was sent to all home tutors with children enrolled at Broken Hill School of The Air for a third round of consultation. The positive responses from the participants at the February workshops and the subsequent written responses from home tutors ensured that the Home Tutor Support Program would proceed.

The Home Tutor Support Program: Objectives

The program's fundamental aim is to assist home tutors in understanding educational processes so that they can provide maximum support to their students' learning.

Primary distance education in NSW is predicated on an instructional model which involves a three-way partnership between the essential elements:

   LEARNING MATERIALS <--> TEACHER <--> HOME SUPERVISOR

For this to function effectively there needs to be a conscious and explicit program which will develop communications and understandings between writers of materials and each of the other two partners. This includes the possession by the participants of a common language and sets of concepts with which they can describe, explain and understand the philosophies and processes of instruction.

One major objective of the Home Tutor Support Program is to assist in the development of that common language and to empower tutors in their role.

At Broken Hill SOTA a number of families employ a governess to supervise their children. To some extent the expectations of the Home Tutor Support Program expressed by governesses were different from those of many of the parent-supervisors. Governesses were more likely to be seeking formal employment-related qualifications which could strengthen their employability as governesses and which might later gain credit towards a post secondary qualification. Parent-supervisors were also concerned that the program give them some tangible recognition of their achievement, but a smaller proportion of them were concerned about the convertibility of the qualification.

The program's second objective is to provide tangible recognition of the skills acquired by home tutors in distance education by giving them a formal qualification which has the potential for articulation with tertiary or TAFE programs.

The Home Tutor Support Program: Program Development

The agreed outcomes of the three rounds of consultation regarding the focus, content and nature of the Home Tutor Support Program are described below.

Workshop Outcomes:Identifying the Needs and Wishes of the Participants

The following 4 themes or topics surfaced as important to all home tutors. High priority areas shown in italics

CURRICULUM

LEARNING
DEVELOPMENT
THE TUTOR

● broad knowledge of each KLA

●current DSE policies and approaches to content and sequencing of learning materials

●reasons/rationale for content selected

● recognising expected depth of treatment for different areas of content
●ways in which children learn

●enthusing/ motivating children to learn

● monitoring progress

●planning alternative activities

●extending the learner
●developmental stages/child development

●matching expectations and content with child's development

●social and interpersonal skills

●classroom management and keeping the child on task

- recognising and managing learning difficulties
- defining the role

- separating roles eg mum/tutor/friend

- access to sources of help (teaching materials, resources, support people)

- tutor/teacher relations

The Home Tutor Support Program: Participant Expectations

From the consultation process, two key themes that the participants saw as essential features for the program emerged. These themes related to the home tutor's children and to the recognition of their achievement in the program. These outcomes are summarised below.

What participants would like from the program

In relation to educating children

In relation to personal achievement

- A better understanding of the educational process

- How to apply that knowledge to our children's learning

- Giving our children the best possible education
- Gaining formal recognition and qualification

- Gaining access to further studies eg teacher training

- Satisfaction in doing the job in a more informed way

The Home Tutor Support Program Structure

The course has been organised into a series of ten modules. Each module's duration is about six weeks.

The 'Curriculum' and 'Learning' columns have been combined -- ie to look at 'Learning' in the context of each separate Key Learning Area (eg, Maths, Science and Technology, etc).

Module Titles

1. Learning about English K-6
2. Learning about Mathematics K-6
3. Learning about Science & Technology K-6
4. Learning about Human Society & Its Environment K-6
5. Learning about Personal development, Health & Physical Education K-6
6. Learning about Creative & Performing Arts K-6
7. Children & Their Development (ages 5-8)
8. Children & Their Development (ages 9-12)
9. Managing Learning
10. The Home Tutor

Course Duration
● from 6 - 12 months (maximum duration)
● flexible entry/exit points (esp. with different needs of governesses/mothers taken into account)

Course Presentation
● the materials need to be user-friendly. The background and experiences of the tutors must be considered so that educational language, departmental jargon and acronyms (eg, KLA) are well-explained. The materials must be practical, with examples from the SOTA learning materials used as much as possible.

Course Focus
● the program is designed to be a support program, so support for tutor's work is highest priority.

Course Coordination
● Dr Colin Boylan, from Charles Sturt University was appointed to this role.

Characteristics of the Home Tutors

Earlier, mention was made of a survey sent to all Broken Hill School of The Air home tutors. One part of the survey focussed on the structure, organisation and content of the Home Tutor Support Program which has been described earlier. A second part of the survey sought biographical information about the home tutors. This was included to provide information to these questions:-

● Who are the home tutors?
● What is their experience in home tutoring?
● What educational attainment levels do they have?

The biographical survey was returned by 14 home tutors (response rate 28%).

The first question sought to identify who were the home tutors. In
most situations the mother of the family was the home tutor (12 cases),

with the remaining respondents (2) being employed governesses. This
finding was comparable to Squires and Smith (1994) work which indicated
that the state wide figure for parent-supervisors was 90%.

The second question sought information on the range of home tutoring
experience of the group. This ranged from those being in the first
year as a home tutor (both governesses and mothers) through to 13 years
(mothers). For the majority (57%) they had less than 4 years home
tutoring experience. Most home tutors, almost two-thirds (64%), were
responsible for supervising 2 or 3 primary children with the remainder
(36%) being responsible for 1 primary child.

The third question dealt with the highest level of educational
attainment of the home tutors. All home tutors had completed Year 10
(School Certificate) secondary education.   For 3 home tutors, their
highest level of educational attainment was Year 11. The remaining
home tutors (11) had completed Year 12 or the Higher School
Certificate. For 6 of this group of 11 home tutors (including the 2
governesses), this was their highest level of educational attainment.
Of the remaining 5 home tutors, 3 had completed a TAFE qualification
and 2 had completed a university qualification.

The Home Tutor Support Program: 1996 Situation

The program commenced in October 1995 with 22 home tutors expressing a
wish to receive the ten (10) modules constituting the program. The
following modules have been developed and sent to the participants:

1)Child Development (5-8 years)
2)Child Development (9-12 years)
3)English K-6
4)Managing Learning
5)Mathematics K-6

The remaining modules will be developed and dispatched to participants
over the forthcoming six months of 1996.

6)Creative and Performing Arts K-6
7)Science and Technology K-6
8)Human Society and Its Environment K-6
9)Personal Development, Health and Physical Education K-6
10)The Home Tutor

A sample of the structure of the Child Development (ages 5-8 years)
module is shown below to provide readers with an overview of the
structure of each module.

Figure 1

Content and Structure of Child Development (5-8 years) Module

INTRODUCTION

PART 1   PART 4
Understanding Similarities and DifferencesClassroom Management and
Becoming an Observer of ChildrenLearning Behaviour
A Quick Look at Children from 1 - 4

PART 2   PART 5
Physical DevelopmentSocial and Interpersonal Skills
Perceptual Development
Social and Emotional Development

                        PART 6
Cognitive DevelopmentLearning Difficulties
Language DevelopmentHearing Impairment
Visual Impairment
PART 3Hyperactivity
The Child and LearningSpeech and Language Impairment
Specific Learning Disabilities

Formative Evaluation of the Program

During 1996, two main sources have provided information for the
formative evaluation of the program in operation.

First, in July 1996, each participant in the Home Tutor Support Program
was telephone interviewed to gain a progress report on the program.
The purposes of the interview were to:

i)determine who was participating in the program;
ii)seek participants' reactions to the program so far;
iii)seek comments and suggestions on the content of the modules
developed; and
iv)discuss the assessment process in the program.

Some of the key finding from this interview process are listed below.

When the Home Tutor Support Program commenced, there were 22
participants. Twelve (12) months later (July 1996) there were 17
participants. Six participants had ceased to be involved with the
program and one late starter had been included. Of the six
participants who left the program, three (3) had moved off the property
and were no longer associated with the Broken Hill School of The Air.

The remaining three participants indicated that they were unable to
devote any time to reading the materials and requested to be not
associated with the program.

For the remaining 17 participants, the telephone interview provided
useful, formative information about the program, the module's content
and the assessment tasks.

The overall response to the program has been positive. All 17
participants reported they found the program interesting, personally
satisfying and helpful in their teaching of their children. eg. 'I
thoroughly enjoyed both the Child Development modules as they were
related directly to where my child is' (Mother #1); 'It has helped me
teach my own children better' (Mother #2); 'I'm not a teacher and I
was looking for help to teach my child correctly' (Mother #1).

Participants also commented favourably on their improved knowledge
about educational practice and teaching skills which empowered them to
discuss their concerns with their child's teacher in Broken Hill. eg.
'I feel more confident in what I'm doing' (Mother #6); 'I now have
different ideas and different approaches to teaching the work' (Home
Tutor #9).

At the personal level, a number of the participants mentioned that they
found the intellectual stimulation from reading the materials was
personally satisfying, eg. 'My personal self-esteem has benefitted'
(Mother #10); 'I was really overawed at the start [when first child
started on SOTA - 2 years ago] and I felt very swamped with the
responsibility of teaching my child. I now have developed confidence
in what I do in the classroom' (Mother #13); 'I enjoy the intellectual

stimulation' (Mother #5). 'I now have ways of extending the children's
knowledge and interests by fanning out sideways rather than upwards'
(Mother #8).

Responses to specific questions relating to the modules received so far
in the program indicated most participants found each module was well
organised, easy to read, any educational jargon was clearly explained
and the materials were written in an easy to understand way. Generally
they reported the depth of treatment within each module was
satisfactory. Some critical comments about the English K-6 module were
made. These comments were constructive suggestions on ways to improve
the module by identifying the need to add more practical examples on
basic language issues such as spelling and grammar.

During the interview, the issue of assessment tasks was raised. About
one third (6 of the 17 participants) are completing the assignment that
accompanies each module. The remainder stated that they do not submit
the written assignment. Their reasons were varied: eg time

constraints preclude this aspect of the program, the participant only
wants to receive the materials, the participant is not seeking formal
recognition for completion of the course.

Second, in May and August 1996 the SOTA principal was interviewed by
telephone to gather his impressions of the effectiveness of the
program. The principal reported chiefly on the effects of the program
on illuminating and clarifying the differences between the roles and
expectations of distance education teachers and home tutors.

Operation of the program has served to identify the extent and nature
of the 'gap' between the skills and knowledge of the trained distance
education teachers and those of home tutors. This gap has been masked
in the past by a lack of opportunities and / or a strong need to
closely examine the respective uses of educational languages and
concepts by teachers and lay tutors. The program has allowed
participants to critically analyse their skills and understandings and
to come to a more informed realisation of their extent and limitations.
 From the school's point of view the program has made them realise that
the home tutors generally did not have the skills and understandings
which have been attributed to them and that they require a good deal of
additional support in order to better understand basic teaching
principles and practices. The school has, in the past, been assuming
too high a level of common ground on issues such as pedagogy,
principles of curriculum design and educational philosophy. This has
probably made the home tutors' task more difficult and may have
militated against the learning process.

To sum up, this formative feedback from the home tutors and the
principal indicated that the program is meeting the needs of the
participants, they have found the content within the modules has been
relevant and directly applicable to what they do in the classroom and
has assisted in understanding why their child(ren) behave the way they
do. This has produced a new level of self confidence in the home
tutors and in their ability to successfully teach their child. The
home tutors have made constructive suggestions on the organisation of
the modules which will be included in still to be developed modules.

As one mother stated:

'none of us choose to be teachers, it's just we married the wrong man'

    (Mother #13)

yet they have accepted the task and strive to do the best for their
children. Within this context, the Home Tutor Support Program has
succeeded in helping these isolated home tutors understand the
educative process, has provided valuable insights into the essential
differences between the home tutor and the distance education teacher

roles and has greatly helped the school and its teachers to understand and appreciate the needs of home tutors for support in the role they have thrust upon them.

Recent Developments

Since the first module appeared and the 'bush telegraph' started to spread the word about the program, five developments have occurred.

●Requests for access and use of the materials have been received from 3 other western primary Distance Education Centres (Hay, Dubbo and Tibooburra).

●Requests for access and use of the materials from a number of face-to-face schools who wish to use the program with parents at their school.

●The NSW Department of School Education has become a stakeholder in the program with a view to offer the program as a state-wide initiative for all home tutors of primary aged children.

●The Broken Hill School of The Air has sent the English K-6 Module to every home tutor with a child enrolled in the school, as a result of the positive comments made by the participants in the program once they had received this module.

●The principal has commented to the course coordinator that home tutors are communicating with their distance education teacher more regularly and are using the educational language used by teachers to explain their questions, concerns or enquiries.

Conclusion

From a demonstrated need to assist isolated home tutors, a tripartite partnership between the Broken Hill School of the Air, Charles Sturt University and the NSW Department of School Education has evolved. The focus of the partnership has been to develop a program for home tutors to improve their ability to understand and implement the distance based learning materials and act as the central intermediary in the learning process for their child(ren). This is known as the Home Tutor Support Program. The program is a systematic, sustained and comprehensive coverage of the educational, pedagogical and curricular issues surrounding the role expectations of home tutors.

To date, the feedback from participants about the program is positive. Many participants value the content contained within each module and its relevance to their role as a home tutor. Additionally, they have found the assistance and guidance provided to them to become more confident in mediating between the learning materials, the distance education teacher and organising the learning experiences of their

child(ren).

Further developments suggest the program has application in other Distance Education Centres as well as a training program for parents with children in face-to-face school situations.

References

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