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A PROGRAMME OF COLLEGE EDUCATION FOR
MOTHERS WITH SMALL CHILDREN:

AN EVALUATION OF ITS EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

ABSTRACT: An innovative programme in education and mental health for mothers (largely middle class) of pre-school children has been established by Marianopolis College in Montreal, in collaboration with the Mental Hygiene Institute. Many young mothers feel alienated from a rapidly changing society and would like to return to their studies but the difficulties inherent in such a step prevent most from doing so. Aware of these feelings of stress, frustration, and alienation, the College established a programme whereby the women could attend classes during the morning hours and bring their children with them to the free nursery school on campus, which was organized specifically for this purpose. Some courses were offered to the women as a group, thus lessening the tension of attending classes alone with much younger students.

Evaluation of the first year of the project revealed that these women were capable of integrating their roles of wife, mother, and student; had achieved a sense of competence enabling them to pursue further studies individually; and for the most part, were now able to choose an occupational goal. In future it is intended to extend the programme so that mothers of lower socio-economic levels could avail themselves of this same opportunity.

A pilot project in education and the enhancement of mental health was begun in September, 1971, at Marianopolis College, Montréal, under the joint sponsorship of the College and the Mental Hygiene Institute. Both institutions had become aware of a widespread sense of alienation among mothers of pre-school children. Faced with the demands, both intellectual and economic, of a rapidly changing and extremely complex society, such women often experience feelings of stress which seriously hamper their effectiveness, both within the family

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and in the community. This stress reflects a sense of personal inadequacy in the face of the knowledge explosion which directly affects the life of the young mother whose education has little prepared her to understand or cope with this diffusion of information. On a more practical level the young mother is worried about her lack of specific academic training for employment should her husband for some reason become unable to work. The lack of self confidence, the malaise, the tension experienced by the mother must, inevitably, affect the total atmosphere of the home, with possible detrimental effects on the entire family.

Many field studies, such as that of Prince (1966) support the above statement. Research has clearly indicated that housewives suffer disproportionately high levels of psychological stress as measured by symptom check lists which show elevated scores on such symptoms as headaches, insomnia, and depressed feelings. The Marianopolis programme was aimed at relieving some of the causes of stress and providing, as indicated in the college brochure:

1. a convenient way of beginning academic work after an absence of years.
2. guidance in formulating a realistic plan for continuing education based on personal interest, needs and aptitudes,
3. professional assistance in adjusting to the multiple roles of wife-mother-student.
4. infant and pre-school care on the campus at no cost to the student mothers.

The course was open to women of all ages and was planned specifically for married women, who for one reason or another had not had the opportunity to attend college.

After interviews with staff members of both institutions, 28 mothers were enrolled in the specially designed morning programme of CEGEP studies, and approximately the same number of children entered the Child Care Centre which operated from 8:45 to 12:15, Monday through Friday.

The Child Care Centre was set up specifically for the convenience of the mothers so that they could bring their children with them and be assured of their well-being while they attended classes at the College. Many of the mothers would not have entered the programme if this care had not been provided.

PROGRAMME EVALUATION

The project was evaluated before, during, and after the academic year 1971-1972 by the Mental Health Kit, and the Programme Effects Questionnaire. The results are presented in two parts: Part I presents the findings from the Mental Health Kit evaluations, and Part II the results of the analysis of the Programme Effects Questionnaire which was administered on four separate occasions.

Part I

The Mental Health Kit (MacLeod, Silverman & Poland, 1957; Shapiro & Maholick, 1963; Shapiro, Maholick, Brewer, & Robertson, 1968)

was administered during the orientation period immediately preceding the academic year. The Kit consists of an information face sheet, a biographical review, an information check list, open-ended questions pertaining to personal, social, family, and occupational roles, and three standardized measures: the Cornell Index (Brodnan, Erdmann, & Wolff, 1956), the Mooney Problem Check List (Mooney & Gordon, 1950), and the Langner Scale (1962). These three measures of stress include a wide range of psychological and psychophysiological symptoms such as nervousness and anxiety, fear and inadequacy, questions pertaining to personal, social, family, and occupational roles, social, home and family, religious, and health functioning. These last-mentioned three measures were also administered at the conclusion of the project.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ON 28 WOMEN WHO BEGAN THE COURSE

| | |
|----------------|----------|
| Mean age | 32 |
| Ethnicity | |
| English | 19 (68%) |
| French | 6 (21%) |
| European | 3 (11%) |
| Religion | |
| Roman Catholic | 15 (54%) |
| Protestant | 12 (43%) |
| Jewish | 1 (4%) |

The Mental Health Kits were assessed by Mental Hygiene Institute staff members and the women were informed by letter of the results. They were also free to discuss the results with the staff if they so desired. In summarizing the Kit data, recommendations for further help were made wherever indicated. For this group, one was advised to have a psychiatric consultation, six were recommended to marriage counsellors, and twenty-one were considered to need no further professional help.

TABLE 2
STRESS SCORES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE COURSE (N = 28)

| Measure | Number of Items | Mean Score |
|------------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Cornell Index | 101 | 6.7 |
| Mooney Problem Check List | 288 | 28.6 |
| Langner | 22 | 2.5 |

Table 2 provides mean stress levels at the time of entry into the programme. These results on the stress measures are within acceptable levels and imply an adequate coping with tension as measured by psychological and psychophysiological symptoms. It is worth noting, however, that this sample of middle-class housewives reflects the reluctance of this socio-economic group to admit to such symptoms. The presence of frustration, dissatisfaction with a housewife-only role, feelings of alienation from society, worry about future job opportunities, and the sentiment of being the "forgotten segment of society" were clearly stated in their commentaries on role fulfillment in the biographical sections of the Kit.

Results — Before and After

At the conclusion of the project, the results from the stress measures were computed for 18 women. Six women had dropped out of the programme and four had not returned the data in time for this report. Of the six who dropped out, one moved to another city. It is suggested that the remaining five women found the four courses, required by governmental standards for full-time student status and the allocation of funds, too heavy a load.

Table 3 contains the mean before and after scores for 18 of the 22 women who participated in the evaluation and the before mean scores for the 6 women who dropped out of the programme.

TABLE 3

STRESS SCORES OF GROUP BEFORE PROGRAMME AND BEFORE-AFTER STRESS SCORES FOR GROUP WHO COMPLETED COURSE

| Measure | Subjects | Number | Means | |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------|--------|-------|
| | | | Before | After |
| Cornell Index | Completed | 18 | 5.5 | 5.9 |
| | Drop Outs | 6 | 9.5 | |
| Mooney Problem Check List | Completed | 18 | 26.1 | 20.0 |
| | Drop Outs | 6 | 41.5 | |
| Langner | Completed | 18 | 2.3 | 2.0 |
| | Drop Outs | 6 | 3.7 | |

Two aspects of the results are worth noting: 1) with the exception of the Cornell Index, the stress levels were lower at the end of the programme; and 2) the stress levels for the drop outs were notably higher than for those who completed the academic year. It is suggested that a combination of greater stress and the heavy course load may have accounted for their quitting college.

In order to ensure that the stress levels were not unduly influenced by life change factors, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) was administered as part of the final evaluation. This

scale ranks changes which occur during a one-year period and which influence inner feelings of stress. Among the items covered by the scale are those dealing with death in the family, changes of job, economic difficulties, family moves, illness, etc. In reviewing the results for this group of 18, it was found that the mean group score was 149, a figure well below the cutoff point of 300 which has been found to be the level at which persons are very likely to become ill or have accidents.

To explain the slightly higher Cornell Score in the group of 18, a study was made of individual results. It was found that only one woman scored more than 300 on the Social Readjustment Scale. Her results on this scale and on the stress measures were deleted from the group. This adjustment supports the finding, verified in the qualitative data, that in general, the stress levels were reduced by participation in the programme.

PROGRAMME EFFECTS QUESTIONNAIRE

Open-ended questionnaires dealing with effects of a return to school on the individual, her husband, the marriage, children, and social life were administered four times during the academic year. The first evaluation was made at the end of the first week of courses in September. Follow-ups were made in October, January, and April. Due to the qualitative nature of these data, the effects were analyzed for stated changes, both individually and as a group. The discussion below presents these initial reactions and the specific effects of the programme as described by these women at the end of the academic year. The October and January assessments provided on-going information on the changes as they occurred and which were considered to be in effect by the April evaluation.

Initial Reactions

The first reactions to the programme were overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic: the women were appreciative of the opportunity to re-enter the academic world, relieved to have their children on campus in the Child Care Centre, and very happy to broaden and deepen their knowledge. They were worried about their ability to study, to cope with technical subject matter, to organize their home and family life, and to deal with transportation difficulties during the winter.

Expectations of what they would gain from the programme were largely focused on a need to stimulate the mind, get out of the house and meet friends with similar backgrounds and aspirations, fulfill personal potential, find the stimulation and interest in the current world which would make them again a part of it in a more meaningful way. As can be seen, these early expectations were rather generalized and imprecise as they did not know, and could not know what the year would mean to them in terms of self-improvement.

Most husbands were pleased that their wives were returning to school, although a few were skeptical of their wives' ability to re-orient so much of their lives, and "make it work."

The initial period had considerable effect on their family lives: difficulties in reorganization of time and the sharing of household tasks and duties, the establishment of priorities as wife-mother-student, and participation in an already established social life with their husbands. The first period of exams was a time of considerable stress for themselves and their families. It was only later that they realized that they had been striving and studying for high marks and that this had accounted for much unnecessary tension for the whole family.

Their belief in the programme as fulfilling a community need was enthusiastic:

It fulfills the need for a mother's education, because it isn't easy to find sitters, or to do it at night. Not everyone wants to stay at home and stop learning new things.

Married women have very little that is serious or important arranged with them in mind. One gets tired of all those past-times, painting, yoga, etc.

It brings women together to discuss problems — brings them out of their isolation. This course should make us more aware of ourselves as persons — more confident — more able to cope with everyday demands, and needs of those around us.

A lot of women I know have extra time at home, and feel a great need to be stimulated by other than housework. This is a wonderful way to return to the busy "other half of the world," and include the children who would normally be at home.

I have felt that the 30-40's were a forgotten generation... we are too young just to stay home, and have too many responsibilities just to try to "discover" ourselves. This provides a chance to do more than just "lunch and bridge."

Many women really need to study more, but it is not easy to go back to school with students younger than us.

These above statements reflect their satisfaction in returning to school in a group, especially organized for them, without having to mix with large numbers of younger CEGEP students.

FINAL EFFECTS

Expectations

This programme of classes fulfilled the women's needs for intellectual stimulation, personal fulfillment, and so forth. Most remarkable at the end of the year was the change in orientation towards the expectation of using their knowledge for others: there was a shift from a desire for high marks to an actual participation and involvement in a learning experience — knowledge was sought with the purpose of applying it to self and the service of others. The final evaluation question was, "At the beginning of the school year, you hoped to get certain things out of it. (a) Did you get them? (b) Did these expectations change?" One woman responded: "Absolutely! I came with the idea of getting my mind to work again and to find out my main area of interest which I might pursue for a career when my children are older. And I have." Another replied: "Yes, I got much more

than I expected. Along with personal gratification, I think my relationship with my husband and child is better. I did not expect to like studying as I never did in high school. However, I find I enjoy it very much."

Self-improvement

The greater changes were in a marked enhancement of self-esteem, feelings of security, and determination to continue on their own had lain dormant or was previously unsuspected. The women felt more complete as individuals and more capable — not only as students but as wives and mothers. Earlier tension over exams had lessened considerably and tests were no longer regarded as proof of personal worth. Consistent success in course work resulted in deep feelings of satisfaction and happiness.

The women felt more competent intellectually, more stable emotionally, and better able to interact socially as interesting and interested persons. Remarks on greater flexibility of thought and attitude, feelings of security, and determination to continue on their own appeared throughout the final evaluation questionnaires. There were no responses which indicated a lack of self-improvement.

Home and family

Initial worries over integrating the three roles of wife, mother, and student had largely disappeared. Regarding their marriages, the women felt that they and their husbands had come together in much closer relationships. Time began to be qualitatively important and communication was improved as they discussed projects together. The mothers felt more able to contribute on an intellectual level in social gatherings. One woman remarked that she and her husband began to make a point of going out once a week alone together just to be with each other. Husbands in general were now very enthusiastic and proud of their wives' accomplishments. Household duties had become a cooperative venture with husband and children sharing household tasks.

Women with younger children noted a marked improvement in behaviour which they felt was due to the experience in the Child Care Centre, described by them as "fantastic." Their children had become more sociable, better able to share and play with their peers. The mothers felt that their relationships with their young children had greatly improved because they themselves felt better, less tense, more confident, and that this new "happy attitude" communicated itself to the children.

With older children there was less of a marked difference in outward behavior, but subtle and important changes had taken place. Older children gradually showed pride in the fact that "mother is a student." Sometimes they resented the fact that she could not care for them as before, but after the initial adjustment of family life, they became more independent and self-sufficient as they shared the responsibilities of family life in a more significant way: every-

one left home in the morning, either for work or school, and even the younger children learned to help make this possible.

Possibly the most significant finding in this area of child-parent relationships was the awareness at the end of the year by mothers that their older children especially had developed a healthier attitude towards school. They began to understand and appreciate the value of education and became more interested in their own work. The fact that they could at times "help mother" in school matters, instead of vice versa, gave them a feeling of being needed and worthy. School had become a "family affair."

Social life

In responding initially to the question as to what effect the programme was having on their social lives, the women noted a decrease in outside social activities, especially during examinations, but this had gradually returned to normal. Not one mother initially related this question to the family as a social unit. A significant finding of the on-going evaluation was the gradual shifting of social activities with friends and others to a centering of activities within the family as a social unit. Activities and time together became more important, and in the final questionnaire, the life of the family was discussed in considerable detail. Outside social contacts were not restricted or considered unimportant — instead they assumed only part of the "social life" of these families. The results suggest that the perspective of the family as a social unit, doing things together as a family, took on a new and satisfying importance.

Future educational plans

As noted above, the original desire to study was largely for personal reasons. A few women had stated different occupational goals, but on the whole, there was little mention of completing the CEGEP course or going on to university, or working towards a specific technical degree. The final evaluation showed that all of the women plan to continue their education and three-fourths of them expressed a wish to go into service professions such as child care, psychology, and social work. It appears obvious that the programme brought the women beyond their own needs to concern for others. They now aim towards eventual entrance into the job market when their children are older. They are determined to maintain a lifelong involvement in society by putting their education to better use.

Negative aspects of the programme

There were very few negative reactions to the programme and nearly all concerned practical factors: getting to school with small children during the winter months, sickness in the family which meant missing school, attendance (for most) five mornings a week. While appreciating both the advantages and restrictions of the morning programme, the majority are prepared to integrate themselves in the regular college schedule if this is necessary in order to pursue precise

educational goals. In summary, it can be said that the negative aspects are far outweighed by the positive attainments. Whatever difficulties were encountered by individuals were considered personal to them, and had nothing to do with the programme itself.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that this project was very successful in the eyes of the participant mothers: they felt that they had participated in a relevant educational experience, beneficial intellectually, emotionally, and socially, and that they had enhanced their roles as wives and mothers. A study of the stress scores indicates that these women were coping adequately and enjoyed good mental health before they began the programme. This is even more obvious in the results found in Table 5.

TABLE 4
MEAN SCORE ADJUSTMENT

| Measure | After Means N = 18 | Adjusted Means N = 17 |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Cornell Index | 5.9 | 5.3 |
| Mooney Problem Check List | 20.0 | 17.2 |
| Langner | 2.0 | 1.6 |
| Life Change Scale | 149.0 | 136.1 |

TABLE 5
STRESS SCORES ACCORDING TO SEX AND MARITAL STATUS

| | Number | Mean Langner |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------|-----------------|
| Low-Income Central City Sample | 258 | 3.8 |
| Low-Income Central City Males | 126 | 2.9 |
| Low-Income Central City Females | 132 | 4.6 |
| Low Income Housewives | 56 | 5.6 |
| Low Income Mothers without Husbands | 14 | 7.8 |
| Psychiatric Out-Patient Clinic (Male and Female) | 101 | 10.5 |

Table 5 contains stress score comparisons of other groups and it is obvious that the project mothers, with a mean Langner score of 2.0 after the programme, were indeed healthy. It is significant that the six

mothers who began and later dropped out had elevated stress levels. It would appear that the course load does play a significant role in the successful completion of studies. This will be of even greater significance when the original goal of the programme is realized: the provision of this educational opportunity for mothers from lower socio-economic groups.

RESUME: Le Collège Marianopolis de Montréal, en collaboration avec l'Institut d'Hygiène Mentale, a instauré un nouveau programme d'éducation et de santé mentale pour les mères (de classe moyenne surtout) ayant des enfants d'âge préscolaire. Beaucoup de jeunes mères se sentent à part dans cette société de changements rapides et aimeraient retourner aux études. Toutefois, les difficultés inhérentes à une telle décision les empêchent de la prendre. Le personnel du Collège, conscient de ces sentiments d'inquiétude, de frustration et d'aliénation, a établi un programme permettant à ces femmes d'assister aux cours durant l'avant-midi et de confier leurs enfants à la maternelle située sur le campus. Ce service est gratuit et a été organisé précisément pour répondre à ce besoin.

Quelques cours ont été offerts exclusivement à ces femmes, de façon à réduire la tension reliée au fait de se trouver dans une même classe avec des étudiants beaucoup plus jeunes.

L'évaluation du projet après un an révèle que ces femmes étaient capables d'intégrer leurs rôles d'épouse, de mère et d'étudiante. Elles avaient acquis un sentiment de compétence leur permettant de poursuivre individuellement leurs études. Enfin, la plupart étaient devenues aptes à se choisir des objectifs professionnels. Pour l'avenir, on espère pouvoir élargir le programme aux mères de niveaux socio-économiques défavorisés, de façon à ce qu'elles puissent bénéficier de la même opportunité.

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