News from the Unit

As this column was being written, a van delivered bound copies of Toothbrushing in Adolescence, the metamorphosis of the bundle of papers that was spotted being 'hurled into the publishing office' in a Unit News report last year.

There has been much published research into young people and dental care, but this seems to be the first time that a dental specialist (in this case Dr Ian Macgregor) has been invited to look at dental care from the perspective of young people's lifestyles, as revealed by the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire. In years to come, this may well be seen as a pioneering document. Telephone 0392 264722 for further details.

The data preparation team, led by Beryl, has just experienced what has probably been the most demanding section of its existence. During the last three months they have been processing scripts at a rate of 700,000 keystrokes a week in order to meet survey deadlines in Cambridge, Suffolk, and Northumberland. In addition, the Unit has been very closely involved in the Joint National Survey of Child Stress, from typing up the questionnaires to processing and analysing the data. David has played a major role in the analysis work, as well as in producing a customised survey report for the Northumb- erland Health Related Behaviour survey.

Ann's report on interesting and productive visits to colleagues in Dudley Health Authority, where Dr Alison Hamilton, Director of Public Health, is doing a textbook job of counselling heads and other key personnel at the planning stage of this large survey. Sue has a pile of orders for our first 'Cross-curricular' materials — Sex education (see panel). Her advice is to order while stocks last!

S.F.

Some Unit publications...

Very Young People in 1991... ...... £9.50
Our first primary report, with results from 7,892 very young people between the ages of 9 and 12, who completed Version 4 of our Primary Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire.

Young People in 1993... ...... £25.00
The latest of our annual reports, with results from 15,074 young people between the ages of 13 and 16, who completed Version 16 of the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire.

Cross-Curricular Sex Education... ...... £45.00

Schoolchildren and drugs in 1987... ...... £2.50
The use of 'illegal' drugs, based on the reported behaviour of 18,014 boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 16, is described and discussed.

Alcohol Education in Schools... ...... £15.00
A report on current alcohol education practice in a nationwide sample of secondary schools, with evidence of the wide variety of resources and recom- mendations for good practice.

Young People into the Nineties... ...... £6.00
For 9 Books, £43 (for the set at discount)!
The survey 'of the decade': a study of 25,933 young people aged 11-16, over the period 1984-1990.

These prices include postage and packing

S.F.

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'Children are by nature romantics, until their imagination and creativity are subdued by the pressures of the dominant rationalist world.'

Alan Dyer

Seeking a sense of place

If you go down to the woods today, you may well have a big surprise. Not teddy bears picnicking, but characters who appear to have materialised from a world of ancient myths and fairy tale: nymphs and satyrs, a wizard, a green man, even a firebird; as well as children strolling through the undergrowth in outlandish disguises, often covered with mud, imitating animals and trees.

Visitors to Killerton Park, a beautiful National Trust property near Exeter, have been encountering such phenomena over the last three years, and many must have questioned their eyesight. Yet it is not the first time that Killerton has been associated with such wonders: a few hundred years ago there were reported sightings of a fiery dragon flying to and from the volcanic hill (Dobbley Hill) at the centre of the estate, apparently gunning some sort of treasure.

Confronting the dragon

It was really the dragon that started it all. Dragons have generally had a bad press: the consensus of opinion seems to be that they represent the powerful, unwanted forces of nature, both within ourselves and in the environment at large. So confronting them at numerous levels is important for us all.

Dragons fascinate children, and the idea of a quest for the Killerton Dragon proved a considerable attraction when the National Trust advertised for some young children (aged 8-12) to help with a new, experimental approach to environmental education.

Dragon Quest is based on the idea that children are by nature romantics, until their imagination and creativity are subdued by the pressures of the dominant rationalist world. There is no question that children love stories — the more imaginative the better — and that they are especially attracted to myths and fairy tales,
no doubt because, as Bruno Bettelheim and the Jungians have pointed out, they answer a deep psychological need in the growing child.

‘Primitive’ characteristics

Children also love physical activity; and if the stories and the activity can be brought together, all to the good. This is not new to the classroom, but it is no nonsense for children to be able to re-enact archetypal myths in costume in a natural environment not dissimilar to that of a tribal culture from which the stories first emerged.

In some respects, young children share many of the characteristics of so-called ‘primitive’ indigenous peoples: they have a strong tribal feeling; they are very physical; they relate to the world around them through their senses; they do not hide their emotions; their thought process is not yet rational; they make sense of the world by telling stories about it, and so on.

Children and landscape

Dragon Quest also emerged from a perceived need to give children a ‘sense of place’ in the natural world, to become sensitive to beauty and to the unique character of certain natural landscapes. But it has always been found difficult to get young children to see, let alone appreciate, landscape: they tend to concentrate on what is close to them, and have difficulty in taking in a place as a whole.

This is easily addressed by the right programme in a beautiful setting — but the current challenge for the project is to find ways of achieving these aims for the vast majority of children in urban or inner-city schools, who do not have easy and regular access to beautiful natural landscapes.

Most myths are about certain special places and the role that part of the adventures of a hero or heroine, and the latter’s success in their quest often depends on their sympathy with the natural world and the creatures in it. Unfortunately, most people are unaware of the many delightful stories associated with almost every distinctive feature in the British countryside. Indeed, so many of the stories associated with local places have been lost, forgotten, or modified by recent generations.

Sharing the idea

These views were shared by three people: myself, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Education at the Rolle School of Education, University of Plymouth; John Hodgson, the National Trust’s Education Advisor; and Tim Laycock, a professional folk singer/storyteller who is also an accomplished actor and storyteller. With financial support from the National Trust and practical help from Philip Hall, an ethnomusicologist, plus several arts students from the Faculty as well as the team of enthusiastic local children, they embarked on an extended experiment to test their theories.

The group met and worked together for a whole day on every other Saturday, plus regular weekend camps, over a period of some eighteen months. Many activities were tested, and, although the initial trial period had now ended, there are many more ideas in the pipeline yet to be tried out. John Hodgson and I continue to run the programme on a day-visit basis, which is designed to match the requirements of the individual schools.

Contact with nature

For the most part, the children spent the sessions inside a mystic framework. While appropriate myths from all cultures were carefully selected and used, it was felt that overall storyline was needed, and an ancient Greek belief that Britain, the Land Beyond the North Wind, was some sort of paradise, fitted well with the National Trust’s interest, as the children understood that they had the task of helping to restore the land to its Golden Age condition.

Much of the time was spent in the very beautiful environment of Killerton — in the woods and parkland, or by the river. One aim was to bring the children into intimate contact with nature, so, weather permitting, they were encouraged to wear minimal clothing, no-shirt, gym shorts and bare feet, rather than the ubiquitous anorak, jeans, and trainers of the normal school party.

On occasion, when acting out a story, they added a simple Greek chiton to the basic wear so that they could feel heroically dressed for the part.

‘Tuning-up’

The day’s programme was generally divided into two: a period of ‘tuning-up’, followed by a period of ‘tuning-in’. The first part of the day, the ‘tuning-up’ period, was given over to a range of exercises which aimed to tune up body, mind and senses (including the sixth and seventh senses!), and to bring the children into harmony with each other and with the natural environment. Some activities, such as archery, were introduced primarily as a bait to capture the children’s imagination and channel the need for expressing any ‘wildlife’ tendencies in a controlled way; others, often in the form of games, were carefully designed to stimulate creativity and develop sensitivity.

The arts — or the arts — were a major means of keeping sensitivity alive. The children invented names and stories for the outstanding features of the surrounding landscape; they composed songs, created dances, and performed with shadow puppets; they whitewashed wood and made pictures using only things found in the woods; and they decorated their own costumes (and bodies) with natural materials, including local muds and clays, as well as water-based make-up. They also spent time alone in the woods in their secret places, which they decorated with beautiful objects that they found: stones, twigs and leaves.

‘Tuning-in’

After lunch, they ‘tuned-in’, usually by taking part in an adventure, which often took the form of living through a story from mythology. Once the story had been told, the children dramatised it themselves, often with great imagination. At other times they found themselves in small groups living out the role of fairy-tale hero, faced with a series of hazards presented by archetypal ‘helpers’ (such as an old wise woman, a wizard, or an animal, each in appropriate costume).

The round of the year was punctuated by ceremonies to mark the changing of the seasons. Often these followed traditional lines — wasailing the apple trees in winter, welcoming the summer by crowning a May King and Queen and building a Robin Hood’s bower for them — but at times the children created their own ceremonies.

Special moments

There were also special moments of enchantment: as they circled a 700-year-old oak, soft flute music came from within the tree; then a minstrel, who might have stepped out of Celtic myth, arose at the top as if out of the very trunk, to lead them in a farandole round what was ever after known as ‘The Dancing Tree’.

On another occasion, as they were collecting beautifully-coloured fallen leaves in the woods, they heard the soft call of a pipe in the distance. Slowly and silently a strange figure approached: a Green Man, decked in foliage and with green skin. The children, silent and round-eyed with wonder, were invited to add to his decoration with their leaves before he drifted away as the distant flute resumed its song; a moment which sent a thrill down everyone’s spine.

The children also came together, some using a traditional native American Indian tipi, others preferring to sleep under the stars; they enjoyed torchlight processions at dusk, and discovered that the woods at night are not frighten-
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Most myths are about certain special places and the role that part of the adventure of a hero or heroine, and the latter’s success in their quest often depends on their sympathy with the natural world and the creatures in it. Unfortunately, most people are unaware of the many delightful stories associated with almost every distinctive feature in the British countryside. Indeed, so many of the stories associated with local place have been lost, forgotten, or modified by recent generations that part of the purpose of the project was to ‘re-story’ the landscape.

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The overall aim of the Safety for Life project is to form part of a comprehensive and broad-based safety curriculum.

Tony Pye
Safe as houses? A sniff of danger for 3,000 primary pupils

Early in 1994, 750 children from 22 primary schools in Calderdale took part in a Safety for Life programme organised jointly by Calderdale Healthcare and West Yorkshire Police. Written evaluation by both teachers and pupils testify to its success in raising safety issues, clarifying what the children themselves should do in an emergency, and promoting 'safety' as an effective topic within the curriculum.

The emphasis is on the word 'effective'. Accidents are by far the largest cause of death and injury amongst primary schoolchildren; it is estimated that nationally around 10,000 annually are left with long-term consequences to their health as a result of accidents. It is clear that schools do take safety education very seriously indeed, but it is essential that a comprehensive overview plan, which allows for the growth of ideas, concepts and skills across the age groups, is adopted.

Active safety

Being safe as a concept must mean more than just avoiding accidents. Children need to take an active role in keeping themselves safe. They need to develop the personal skills of judgment, decision-making and assessing risks, and to have the self-esteem and confidence to apply them. Schools have an important part to play in developing these skills and in encouraging partnerships with parents, the wider community, and pupils themselves.

Refining the means to this end has taken several years, and the programme is still being evaluated. It began in 1989-90, when Crime Concern researched youth crime prevention initiatives from across the UK and published Youth Crime Prevention: A Handbook of Good Practice. One of the case studies led to the development of 'Criminal Crew' schemes throughout the country.

Ineffective?

These were based on the belief that traditional crime prevention lacked effectiveness, and that the showing of videos such as Never Go With Strangers, followed by general talks on crime prevention, did not appear to be taken seriously by the children.

'Criminal Crew' came up with the idea of letting the children experience and participate in a range of realistic situations which were potentially life-threatening or criminal, and could be prevented.

In Calderdale, it was initiated by West Yorkshire Police, who approached the Education Department. The project involved a number of other agencies too (the fire and ambulance services, British Rail, and the electricity and gas companies). At that time I was the Advisory Teacher for Health Education.