

A County RSO describes a new approach

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Road Safety: worthy but dull?

Road safety occupies a curious place in the curriculum. This has come about through several uncertainties: what it consists of, whose responsibility it is, whether or not education can be effective, and what potential it offers in the classroom. It is often seen as a topic that can be dealt with by a police talk, or a letter home; it tends to be seen as worthy, but dull.

However, as the biggest single threat to life and limb, not only in childhood but right through to middle age, road accidents deserve (and generally gain) a considerable amount of attention. Millions of pounds are spent on publicity campaigns by the Department of Transport, and all local authorities have a statutory responsibility to promote road-

safety education, training, and publicity. Accidents, in their various forms, are the commonest cause of death for children over one year of age, and they are the cause of numerous GP consultations, attendances at A & E departments, and hospital admissions. Of all accidents, those classified as Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs) are by far the most common.

The health educator needs to know enough about this problem to be able to direct the remedial measures. It is vital to realise the following facts:

- (a) Far more boys than girls are involved in accidents;
- (b) The main cause of accidents to children under the age of 11 is "crossing the road heedless of traffic";

Main accident types for death, attendance at A & E dept., and hospital admission, age 5-14

Death *	Attendance at A & E dept. †	Admission to hospital †
Pedestrian	Accident at play	RTA
Cyclist	Home accident	Accident at play
Drowning	School accident	School accident
Car passenger	RTA	Sport accident
Fire or conflagration	Sport accident	Home accident
Fall	Foreign bodies/ingestion	Burn

* Source: *OPCS 1978 Mortality Statistics: Accidents and Violence*, Series DH4 No 5 (HMSO, 1980).

† Source: Based on a review of all accidents reported in Warwickshire during 1980. Figures supplied by Dr Gordon Avery.

- (c) The peak of bicycle accidents occurs at 13 or 14 years of age;*
- (d) Children from social classes 4 and 5 appear to be most at risk of dying from RTAs;
- (e) The peak age for pedestrian accidents is 5-9 years.

This final point reflects parents' often unjustified confidence in their children's ability to cross roads. One survey (Sadler, 1974) revealed that nearly 20% of parents interviewed felt that a 5-year-old child could safely cross a busy road without supervision. Many Road Safety Officers feel that the most powerful tactic for reducing child RTAs would be to operate a sustained educational effort aimed at parents. Many teachers, too, express the view that road-safety education is a topic best taught by parents. Unfortunately, parents cannot be relied upon to act as a good example, nor will they necessarily take advantage of the educational opportunities open to them. While efforts to reach parents are still taking place (and many of them will, in any case, be through the school), it is my intention to discuss the potential for road-safety education within the school, based on my experience as County Road Safety Officer in Devon.

An isolated topic

Support from the educational planners has been slow to come, and Road Safety Officers, often aided by the police, have been left very much to their own devices. What inroads have occurred have been made using locally-produced teaching materials or those made available by ROSPA or the DoT. Activities have developed around talks, cycle proficiency training and testing, visiting entertainers, and support for teachers undertaking projects on safety. Very often, "road safety" was the exclusive province of an enthusiastic teacher, and remained isolated from other work in the school. Even

in the Devon Authority, with its progressive support of health education, an LEA working party report called *Health and the School* refrained from making detailed comments on road safety, but decided to make it the subject of a separate proposal.

Those involved in road safety have been slow to see themselves as part of the educational process of dealing with the health and well-being of the whole child. In a similar way, health educators often seem less than excited by the prospect of dealing with road safety in anything like the depth actually necessary to be effective. Road safety suffers from its image: it is something to do with the Green Cross Code, with a set of rules, or with a set of physical skills — undemanding, and even childish.

Road safety and the "whole child"

Apart from some far-sighted schools and authorities, it was not until the publication of SCHEP 5-13 that road-safety practitioners began to see themselves as dealing with the life of the whole child, in a curricular approach that took "road safety" out of its former isolation. This move coincided with research suggesting that effective education in this field had to concern itself with the development of a child's attitude as well as knowledge and skills.

This emphasis on attitudes has opened up a new chapter in road-safety education, and promises to be more appealing to class teachers, especially those involved in health education and personal, social, and moral education. This is not, however, to minimise the efforts and indeed results that have been taking place for many years: for example, accidents in Devon to children in the 5-11 age range have shown a net decrease of 24% between 1977 and 1982.

Within Devon secondary schools a similar variety of initiatives is taking place, the single biggest being the Schools Traffic Education Programme (STEP). There are

Many accidents to children are not reported to the police. This particularly affects pedal bicycle accidents, of which, it is estimated, only 10% may appear in the official statistics. The problem is, therefore, greater than the figures suggest.

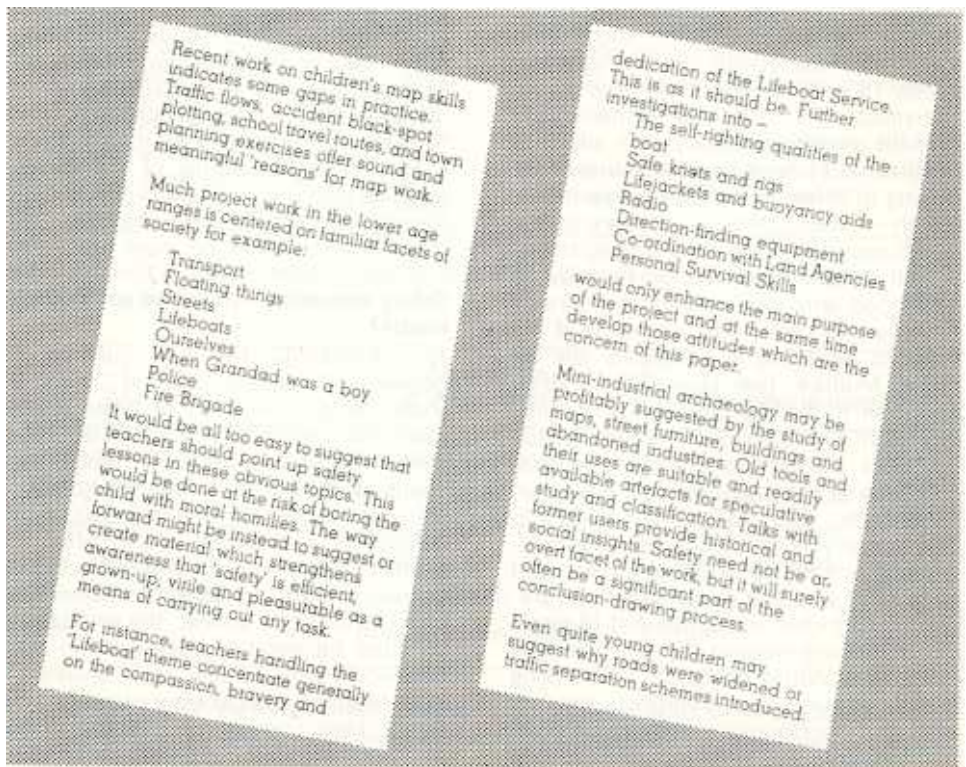
a total of 71 active STEP courses in Devon, covering over three-quarters of the secondary schools, and around 4,250 pupils undergo one of these courses each year. Every STEP teacher has undergone a full week's induction course in the subject, and a growing number of schools offer the topic to CSE level. Increasingly, these teachers are coming forward as traffic-education specialists within the wider sphere of the school's health-education programme.

I should like to conclude this article by referring to the Devon Authority's Road Education booklet *Guidelines for Teachers*, published in 1982. In the section describing the opportunities that exist for bringing road-safety work into different subject areas of the primary and middle school curriculum, it has the following comments to make on History/Geography/Project work:

The booklet also makes the following five points to suggest why previous road-safety initiatives may have failed:

- (a) Adults have over-estimated children's capabilities in safety insights and skills;
- (b) Road safety has been generally "taught" as a set of rules rather than as a vital shaping of positive attitudes. It has for long been seen as tiresome and pedantic rather than as a normal, desirable aspect of adult behaviour;
- (c) In the search for motivation, many training ideas have used fantasy to engage children's attention. Unfortunately, the reality has sometimes been obscured or become secondary to the real point of the exercise;
- (d) The very name "road safety" has acquired a dubious image as an optional extra to the curriculum,

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sometimes lacking structure and co-ordination;

- (e) In the past, many activities done in the name of road safety have lacked intellectual rigour. "Colouring in a Green Cross man" produces little beyond ten minutes of peace and quiet in a classroom.

Others may wish to consider the same points: and, as a member of the working party involved, I should be interested to hear of their views.