

Parenthood: what pupils know and what they learn

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The HEC *Preparation for Parenthood* project (University of Cambridge) commenced in 1982 and is due to report next year. This article describes the background to the work, and the methods being used.

It is obviously impossible to cover comprehensively in a short paper all the issues which underlie our research. Here we deal mainly with our attempt to look at pupil perspective on parenthood education: what pupils know about parenthood before they receive any teaching; the relationship between their existing knowledge and their new learning; and their overall experience of the courses they take. We don't deal, except by implication, with the many complex issues of course rationale and course content.¹ We have found the following particularly useful and stimulating:

James Cowley and Hazel Daniels (1980) on issues of curriculum content and organization.

Lorna McKee (1982) on fatherhood.

Ann Oakley (1979) on the personal and social transformations of pregnancy and childbirth, and the medicalization of childbirth.

Michael Rutter (1976) for a critique of the concept of 'cycles of deprivation'.

Four approaches

For at least a decade 'preparation for

parenthood', including aspects to be dealt with at school, has been officially regarded as a 'good thing'. In fact, the tradition goes back much further, at least to the turn of the century (Lewis, 1980); and this in itself raises interesting questions about why attempts to 'reform motherhood' have been so persistent. One consequence for schools of the recent ferment has been a good deal of curriculum *development*: the Schools Council Health Education and Home Economics Projects, the Family Planning Education Unit, Active Tutorial work and Life Skills have all had some relevance, and there has been the enormous growth of CSE Child Care and Development courses.

In terms of curriculum *research* the picture is much more patchy. We have already mentioned the work of Cowley and Daniels which, though not specifically research based, raised a whole host of important issues by exploring the adaptation of existing Open University materials (*The First Years of Life*, 1977, and *The Pre-School Child*, 1979) for use in an in-service course for teachers. In particular, the arguments relating to the choice between option and non-option courses are put in a cogent and detailed way. It

is suggested that schools may not be the best place to cover all the range of topics presently covered by the umbrella 'parenthood education', but may have to limit their objectives, being only one among many times and places where learning about parenthood takes place. Cowley also raises the important issue of *content* (what do we take as our starting point when we decide what knowledge is relevant to a school educational process?) and *framework* (what bodies of knowledge are significant in deciding what to teach and learn?) He suggests that there are several different approaches that we might take:

- (1) Start from the needs of parents and work back to the school.
- (2) Look at principles of parenting and deciding generally.
- (3) Start from the children, assess what interests and needs they have, and work a curriculum out from there.
- (4) Start from a set of resources and relate to what children know and need.

In research terms an example of approach 1 can be found in the work of Margaret Clark (1981, Head of Manning Comprehensive School in Nottingham), who, by interviewing young parents, was able to indicate the mismatch between their needs and the content of a CSE Child Care and Development Syllabus. In a sense her findings can be read as a critique of approach 2.

Our choice: the third approach

Three papers were available when we were planning our research:

- (1) A description of the different contexts in which 'parenthood' is dealt with in the secondary curriculum (Smith *et al*, 1982).
- (2) An analysis of the relationship between gender and curriculum choices, relating these to the sexual division of labour in the home and the labour market (Grafton *et al*, 1983a).
- (3) An exploration of the dilemmas and contradictions experienced by teach-

ers in raising 'personal' matters in school (Grafton, 1983b).

Would it be unfair to characterize the present state of curriculum development and research as having adopted a strategy of moving in 'from above'? The main emphasis seems to be on the ideas, perspectives, dilemmas, etc. of curriculum planners, developers and teachers. Relatively little attention seems to have been paid to Cowley and Daniels' third option: *start from the children, assess what interests and needs they have, and work a curriculum out from there.*² Perhaps this is inevitable, given the pressures on the curriculum and on teachers' time; but now, when so many issues are still being debated, may be an appropriate time to begin to look at things from a different perspective.

Our own research, previous to our current project, took this view and fitted in broadly with approach 3. In this work we were concerned to explore and register what 15-year-olds 'knew' (in the widest sense) about a range of health issues. This was done by use of a carefully-prepared but nevertheless open-ended interview in which school students were encouraged to discuss with us their views around certain health topics. One of these was concerned with 'motherhood' and was presented in the form of a statement: *It's a good life for a mother at home with a young child*, around which students explored and presented their views.

The detailed results of this research are presented elsewhere (Prendergast and Prout, 1980; Prout *et al*, 1982; Davies *et al*, 1982), and there is not enough space to present them here, but our main conclusions were:

- (1) That 15-year-olds are not ignorant of motherhood and child care. All of them know something about it and most can describe important aspects of the situation in some detail.
- (2) That most students are missing an explanatory dimension to their understanding (probably because they have had little opportunity to explore the possibilities available).

- (3) That the vast majority of students do *not* have a simple 'romanticized' or 'glamorized' view of motherhood. Most also understand, often in graphic detail, the 'negative' aspects of the situation and are 'realistic' about it.
- (4) That many students are puzzled by the contradiction between the glamorized public image of motherhood and their own more negative experience of child care as they are involved in it and as it takes place in the community around them. The girls especially, often seem to be actively grappling with ways of picking out their own future path through these contradictions.

Recognising the pupils' knowledge

These conclusions run contrary to the assumptions of naivety and ignorance about parenthood among teenagers that seem to underlie some writing about the educational task (see, for example, Leach, 1979, pp. 54-5, or Pringle, 1974). They would seem to suggest a different starting point – one which recognizes the knowledge which pupils already have and aims to acknowledge, utilize, extend and deepen it.

Two strands of work, one more practical and one more theoretical, seem to support this view. The first is that of the Development Education Centre in Birmingham, particularly their book, *Values, Culture and Kids* (1983) which explores ways of acknowledging pupils' cultural knowledge as the main resource in learning about child care and development.³ It is interesting that the context of this

work is multi-cultural education, involving pupils from diverse ethnic backgrounds where a normalizing discourse about 'proper parenting' is problematic from the start and where attempts to inculcate certain norms have been rightly condemned as culturally offensive. But do only 'ethnic minorities' have 'culture'? What are the implications of this view for all our teaching?

The second strand is the distinction that Douglas Barnes (1976) makes between 'school knowledge' and 'action knowledge', which seems particularly relevant to areas of the curriculum like parenthood. He writes of the way in which 'school knowledge' may remain alien unless it is available to pupils for their own purposes and able to be incorporated into their own world view. At a more theoretical level, this can be approached in Bernstein's (1971) concept of framing, which refers to the strength of boundary or degree of insulation between the everyday and community knowledge of teachers and pupils and 'educational' knowledge. Barnes has attempted to tackle the problem by experimentation with small group learning and utilizing what he calls an 'interpretation' rather than 'transmission' mode of teaching.

Four "knowledge" questions

We would suggest four questions about parenthood education which arise out of these considerations:

- (1) What do pupils know about parenthood before any of their 'parenthood' classes?
- (2) How does their existing knowledge compare with that available in their school classes?
- (3) How is the exchange between different knowledges influenced by the setting of the class (e.g. option/non-option, single gender/mixed, exam/non-exam) and different classroom practices?
- (4) What sort of new learning takes place in courses of different kinds?

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It is to these questions that we are addressing our research. Before we describe in more detail the methods we are using, readers may wish to consider for themselves a further set of underlying issues which confronted researchers interested in knowledge and learning. What, for example, might be meant by 'knowledge'? Do we count only 'correct' knowledge, guaranteed by some recognized authority or do we include 'knowledge' in its widest sense of all the things 'known' (believed may be preferred by some) by an individual or group? In any case how secure and valid is 'correct knowledge'? Is it as objective as we are often led to believe?

The research plan

Our methodology takes its main focus from qualitative rather than quantitative models of research activity. We have chosen to view teaching and learning as a process rather than as a situation that can be subjected to a simple before and after evaluation in relation to some previously specified objective that it has been designed to meet. We have therefore rejected the so-called 'agricultural-botany' model (Hamilton, 1977) in favour of small scale detailed research, because it seems more able to pick up on the complex texture and subtlety of what can take place in the classroom. As Sue Askew and Carol Ross point out (1983) such illuminative evaluation has its base in programme *activity* not programme *content*, and can document a broad spectrum of phenomena, judgement and response. Nevertheless, this approach can be criticised on a number of counts – perhaps the most important being the danger of diffuseness and the problem of comparison within the data itself. We have attempted to meet these by inserting a number of more quantitative elements into our methodology. We shall use carefully worked out and detailed rating scales to structure the collection and analysis of some of the data. Thus, for example, we shall be able to compare pupil knowledge across a number of knowledge items defined in advance, and

contrast these with a later interview. This, in tandem with qualitative methods, we hope will enable us to cope with the delicacy, detail, intricacies and meaning of what pupils say while remaining reasonably systematic.

In deciding which schools to work in we have had to consider two important factors:

- (1) whether or not parenthood education is taken by pupils by choice or not;
- (2) whether they can take it as an examined or non-examined topic in school.

For reasons too detailed to go into here, we have chosen to look at two optional/examined courses, and two which are non-optional and non-examined. These schools will be in Cambridge-shire and London. We also hope to include a school using experimental materials at present being developed at the Open University by Dorit Braun and utilizing the principles adopted by the DEC project mentioned above.

Data-collection methods

Our main study is focussing on two specific kinds of information gathered throughout the year using interviews and classroom observations/recording as the major methods.

Interviews have taken place with students before the appropriate teaching begins, exploring pupils' knowledge and beliefs around a number of issues, their views of the course and choices they made, as well as their expectations of the course and its teaching. We also hope to interview teachers in a similar fashion, discussing their aims, objectives and approaches to teaching.

Our analysis of pupil knowledge and beliefs gained from these interviews will be set against their contribution and understanding of formal classroom knowledge as it is negotiated through the course. We shall look at pupils' own experience and ideas in relation to the learning of new knowledge and, by comparing it to a final interview at the end of the course, be able to say something

about how knowledge has, or has not changed, during this period. This can be done both at an individual and a class level.

Classroom observation. We have combined audio-taping and transcripts with classroom observations and note-taking. We have found that an observer can fill in important non-verbal aspects of the classroom interaction, spend more time on pupil-pupil talking and track the contributions of individual pupils. The presence of an observer also means that particular aspects of classes can be discussed with pupils and teachers during or shortly after they have occurred.

Our observations and analysis of this have taken place at two levels. First, we



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have aimed to characterize the overall class activity and experience and, second, we have taken individual pupils and followed through their experience and contributions to the class and their own learning.

These observations are being supplemented by informal interviews with teachers and pupils about particular aspects of knowledge, learning activities, homework, etc. During the course of the year, we have also been able to follow through into real experience the expectations of pupils and teachers of the course as it proceeds.

Conclusion

By comparing our interview and observational data gathered in different settings – exam/non-exam, option/non-option, mixed/single gender – we hope to be able to begin to answer the four questions about the relationship between existing knowledge and school learning suggested above. In so doing, we hope to illuminate some of the ways in which curriculum plans are mediated with the classroom, and in students' own learning, for it is the classroom which, in the last analysis, is the site for the educational process in schools and the arena in which our intentions find their most challenging test.

Notes

1. This is an amended version of a paper delivered at the DES course 'Education for Family Responsibility' July 1982.
2. The Aston project has recently published some interesting material on 'pupils' expectations and attitudes' which moves some way in this direction. The emphasis, however, remains on national, LEA and teacher perspectives. Additionally, the approach taken presents a 'snapshot' of children's views and we have little sense of how these change over time in a particular classroom and school setting. See Grafton, T. *et al* (1983c).
3. This approach is being continued in the curriculum development work of Dorit Braun and Naomi Eisenstadt currently working at the Open University on an HEC funded project.

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