

The DES 'Preparation for Parenthood' Report - I

The Report: a summary of its findings

"There does seem to be a wide consensus that this is a field of study which the schools cannot, and should not, ignore if their pupils are to be adequately prepared for life beyond school... The findings of this study do not prompt complacency, and the imaginative leadership of a number of senior school staff needs support and encouragement. Government has a duty to ensure that action follows."

In November 1983, the report of a three-year investigation into *Preparation for Parenthood in the Secondary School Curriculum* was published by the Department of Educational Enquiry, University of Aston. The work was funded by a DES grant, and the Director was Richard Whitfield, Professor of Education and Head of the Department.

On page 52 of this issue, Professor Whitfield responds to questions about the report. Our aim here is to summarise the more interesting findings, and to help bring it to the attention of teachers and advisers who may not yet have obtained a copy.

Background to the report

In 1976, the Court Report¹ stated:

Attention to improving an individual's general ability to cope with life... should be a primary objective of schools. To the extent that is achieved, it will help pupils to cope better in the future as parents.

A White Paper², issued in 1978, endorsed a Select Committee recommendation to the effect that

the government... should ensure that education for parenthood is available for boys and girls of all levels of intellectual ability.

The goal of the Aston enquiry was to describe aims, curriculum structures, teaching approaches, and some consequences of instruction in parenthood-related topics in secondary schools, so that educationists and others might make more informed judgments about the future development of the field. It did not, however, study equivalent work in other countries (particularly the USA), nor did it carry out any evaluation of particular curriculum development models.

The research design

There were three separate but consecutive enquiries, as follows:

Level 1 A survey of all LEAs in England, in which CEOs were requested to complete a questionnaire about policies and provisions with regard to parenthood education in their area.

Level 2 A survey of 217 secondary schools within five LEAs. These LEAs were selected because they were found to have interesting work in progress, and also because they represented a wide range of socio-economic groupings.

Level 3 An intensive study of five schools and their communities, one in each LEA.

We shall present here some summaries of the findings of the report at these three levels.

The nationwide survey of LEAs

The survey of responding English LEAs (of which 71 out of 96 provided usefully-completed questionnaires), showed that specific policies with respect to preparation for parenthood were essentially non-existent, though some authorities had considered strategies for cognate fields, such as health and social education. Home economics, child care, and family courses – a part of the 4th- and 5th-year optional curriculum – were seen by LEAs as important sites for preparation for parenthood, but they were rarely taken by boys, or by girls of high intellectual ability. In-service courses for teaching about parenthood and family life were valued, but this activity tended to be scattered and unco-ordinated – an important conclusion of the report was that the most significant factor in the incorporation of "preparation for parenthood" within the curriculum was the individual teacher's aims, experience, and skills.

The survey of schools within the five selected LEAs

This survey examined those areas of the curriculum which the 217 schools in the five areas (Avon, Knowsley, Lancashire, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire) considered to be relevant to the topic of "preparation for parenthood". It identified 11 *host subject groups* within which the various individual topics could be identified:

1. Social and health education subjects.
2. Biological science subjects.
3. Domestic and catering subjects.
4. Family and child subjects.
5. Religious subjects.
6. Group and tutorial work.
7. Mathematical and business subjects.
8. Social science and general studies subjects.
9. Needlecraft subjects.
10. English subjects.
11. Other subjects.

Altogether, 930 different topic titles were located beneath these various "um-

brellas". Of these, 326 were considered to have preparation for parenthood as a primary aim, and 604 as a secondary aim. The two charts reproduced here show how these topics were distributed, by number, within the host areas.

(It should be pointed out, perhaps, that the pie charts do not necessarily represent the relative *importance*, as perceived by the schools, of the different subject groups; nor do they indicate the relative *time* spent by the pupils on each group.)

Some teachers found it difficult, or impossible, to classify subjects in this way. One Leicestershire respondent commented:

The attitude of the teachers here is very often one of relating what is being studied to reality, as and when the occasion arises, both in their pastoral work and in their subject teaching. It is therefore artificial to extract "bits of curriculum" as if they were self-contained units.

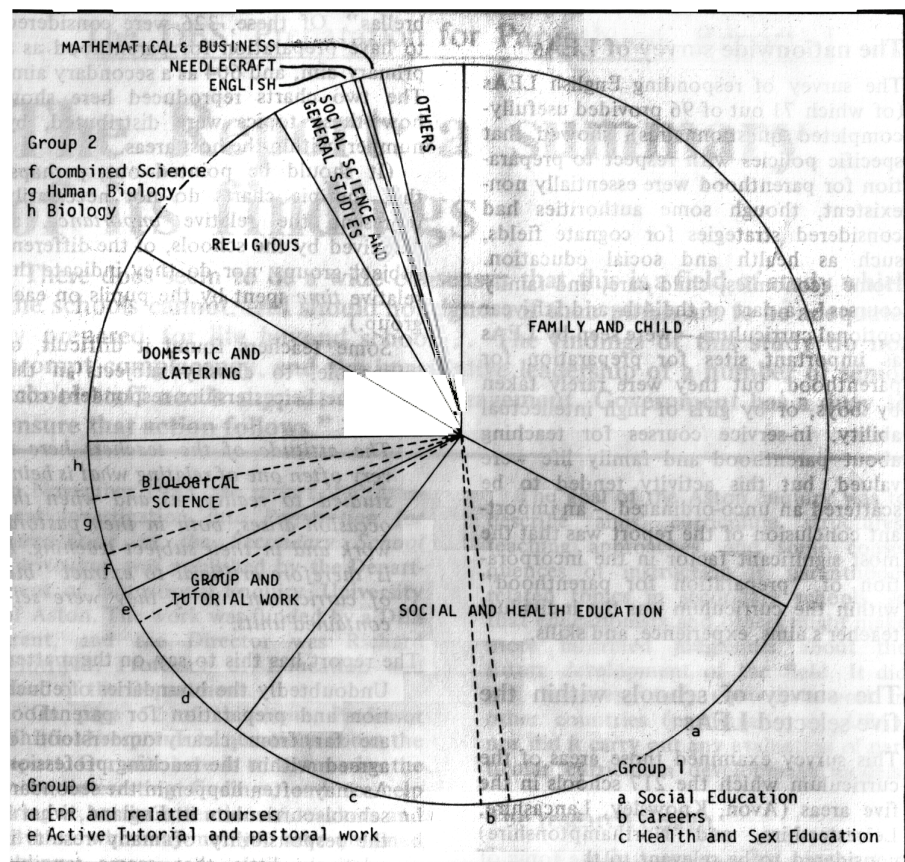
The report has this to say on the matter:

Undoubtedly the boundaries of education and preparation for parenthood are far from clearly understood or agreed within the teaching profession. As may often happen in the secondary school curriculum in England, what is the responsibility of many results in relatively little that seems tangible. Furthermore, what is not the specific responsibility of *someone* remains unco-ordinated, diffuse, and perhaps, for some, repetitive.

The in-depth survey of five selected schools

Among the details revealed in this section of the report was something of the fairly extensive "hidden", unofficial, or informal preparation for parenthood curriculum. The weight of this category of teaching seemed most often to be associated with discussion of aspects of society, such as marital breakdown, the family, working mothers, and racial prejudice.

Teacher interviews reflected a breadth of definition and scope of preparation for



This chart shows the distribution of 326 topic titles having "preparation for parenthood" as a main aim in the curricula of 217 schools in five LEAs.

cated within "preparation for parenthood".

Community members and varied groups of professionals reflected many of the dilemmas expressed by teachers. Areas of possible dissonance between home, community, school, and the influences of the mass media, for example, with respect to reproduction and sex education, were a clear part of the overall picture. Some tensions regarding professional territorial responsibilities between school teachers and health-service

parenthood. This, in turn, was reflected in competing and unco-ordinated aims across subjects, and the patchy and unbalanced curriculum experienced by some pupils. In particular, the need to distinguish more sensitively and accurately between questions of fact and value in a range of situations appropriate to issues of parenthood and family life was highlighted.

The report also notes that teaching in this area of the secondary-school curriculum is, unavoidably, bound up with the teacher's own development and maturity. It is unrealistic to expect any one teacher to be able to develop and provide curricular experiences for pupils appropriate to every legitimate objective which is advo-

personnel were also evident, suggesting the need for more understanding across professional boundaries.

Some overall conclusions of the report

The report considers that "there does seem to be a wide consensus that this is a field of study which the schools cannot, and should not, ignore if their pupils are to be adequately prepared for life beyond school of which parenthood (and non-parenthood) may well be a part". It goes on to make the following important statement:

Although some school-based preparation for parenthood may not, for lack of immediate drill and practice, lead to long-term gains in knowledge and practical skills remembered when and if parenthood arrives, there are grounds for believing that pupils' intrinsic interests can, through appropriate teaching, lead to a heightened awareness of important choices concerning family formation and development, even though, at present, ability and perception of gender roles seem to be the stronger influence. In other words, attitudes are crucial; yet these may only be changed through the acquisition of new knowledge and experience.

The report recommends:

1. Examination and implementation of LEA policy, the role of advisory staff, and headteacher leadership.
2. Attention to school organisation and the appointment of teacher co-ordinators.
3. Re-examination of the structures of option schemes. (It notes that "despite implicit intentions to the contrary, the outcome of curriculum option schemes can be to deny pupils of both higher and lower academic ability an adequately-balanced curriculum".)
4. More male involvement in "family and child" options.
5. Parenthood-related experience for all pupils.

6. Better assessment of pupil progress in relation to this area.
7. Consultation with the community with respect to social, ethnic, and cultural aspects.
8. Better liaison with external agencies (youth and community services, marriage guidance councils, etc.).
9. New initiatives in teacher in-service development and training.
10. Curricular support for LEAs, possibly through a Centre for Family Life Education.

Action now!

The report concludes as follows:

The findings of this study do not prompt complacency, and the imaginative leadership of a number of senior school staff needs support and encouragement. Government has a duty to ensure that action follows to support its well-meaning rhetoric. Hence a clear yet informed and sensitive lead, along with sufficient resources to back it up, is now required from central government and its related development agencies in order to build upon the scattered innovations and the research-informed policy framework of the past decade. With respect to work in secondary schools, the subject of this report, this means action by the Department of Education and Science in liaison, where appropriate, with other ministries, notably the Department of Health and Social Security, though possibly also involving the Home Office and the Departments of Environment and Employment.

(A copy of the report is available from Carol Wheelwright, Department of Educational Enquiry, University of Aston in Birmingham, Gosta Green, Birmingham B4 7ET (Telephone 021-359 3611).)

References

- Court, D.: *Fit for the Future*, HMSO, 1976.
 HMI: *Curriculum 11-16* (with supplement on health education), DES, 1978 (Cmd. 7123)

The DES 'Preparation for Parenthood' Report - 2

Conversation with..

Richard Whitfield

In this interview, Professor Richard Whitfield, director of the project at the University of Aston, explains his curriculum philosophy and describes both the background to the report and the way the work was conducted.

Should parents be expected to handle "preparation for parenthood" themselves; and, if so, what is the evidence that they have failed to do so?

I don't view the justification of "preparation for parenthood" being fundamentally because of some kind of pathological home situation for which we need to compensate, any more than I would see mathematics education in that light. If society is going to have formal schooling for children of between 5 and 16, then I think that in principle it should involve knowledge, understanding, and skills relating to child care and intimate personal relationships. Of course, it's an interesting question as to how much of any kind of teaching and learning should be shared between home and school. But fundamentally, my basic arguments relating to this field would have to cover the same kind of territory that one would need to cover to justify formal schooling at all.

In terms of supplementary argument, one can bring in social and other justifications. But, at its heart, I think that the issue of understanding other people and how to care for other people is a central

part of what I understand the concept of education to be. We are on dangerous ground – and maybe some of the controversies arise there – when one says: "Oh, the divorce rate's high – let's have preparation for marriage and parenthood in schools". Some people *are* saying things like that, and I'm prepared to use arguments like that, but supplementary to the main case. I don't think it would be realistic to expect the most conscientious of parents to be able to do it all as well as it needs to be done. It's a partly professional job in the light of what we know about the psychology and sociology of human development.

Are you saying that there always has been a need for this component, and the need is no greater today than in the past?

Yes; I think that if I could propel myself back two or three hundred years, into an analysis of what was then meant by a well-founded liberal education, then the issue of the nature of persons and an analysis of human needs and how they might be met has to be a very central part. I don't see anything frightfully new about that.

But you think that it was lost along the way?

Yes – as education became more instrumental to employment and technical skills in the economy. On the other hand, in former generations there wasn't the knowledge base that would allow a curriculum to develop, other than the rather hazy notion of "we need to understand other people". This has, I think, been greatly sharpened during this century.

Do you think that the project title of "Preparation for Parenthood" truly represents this curriculum aim? Children will become adults, but they will not necessarily become parents.

We *have* got a problem of nomenclature, and when I talk about "preparation for parenthood" I find myself increasingly

having to make all sorts of qualifications about what it means. One important point is that it includes preparation for *non*-parenthood: in other words, the responsible choosing of a childless lifestyle, which needs to have more status if every child is to be a wanted child. We need a more inclusive concept of "family" which includes recognising that single parents are in a family, and that a youngster perhaps staying for six months with a neighbour is for that period in an "as if" family. There's by no means universal agreement that the phrase "preparation for parenthood" is the term we should be using in schools, except that this is the one presently most commonly referred to.

Could you say a few words about how the project came into existence?

In about 1976, a group of us who were working in very different situations found we had a common interest, and we formed what we called the Preparation for Parenthood Group. We were a slightly motley collection of individuals, but I suppose that the three main people involved, from the professional angle, were Mia Pringle, the late Jack Tizard, and myself. We paid a few visits to the DES and the DHSS to try to encourage them to keep up some momentum in the consideration of this subject, which had had some political interest under Sir Keith Joseph's period at the DHSS round about 1972-74. By about 1976 it appeared that the momentum was flagging, not just politically but also professionally. We never saw ourselves as a permanent group, and we didn't go hunting directly for public funds; we thought we could be a responsible and sensitively-informed pressure group.

The upshot of all this was that I received this contract from the DES to be based at Aston to look into the work of schools, and Mia Pringle obtained a grant from the DHSS to allow Gillian Pugh, at the National Children's Bureau, to look at the question of resources for parenthood-related education, whether at school or beyond school. This allowed

the Bureau to do such things as producing that excellent little pamphlet *A Job for Life*. I think that these two grants have enabled a little bit of the momentum to be sustained against relative indifference both from politicians and civil servants. This field, I think, is much more intimately entwined with the political climate than probably almost any other topic we might think about in the school curriculum.

Were you happy that your remit was to look into existing practice in schools, rather than to research materials and resources?

The form of the contract that we worked to at Aston wasn't agreed overnight, and the final form of the objectives was a compromise between the DES's perceived needs and my own personal wishes. Certain things which I wanted to do, they wouldn't fund; for example, they wouldn't support visits by the research staff to appropriate centres in America, of which I knew it was important for us to be aware. I suppose that, ultimately, I recognised that there would need to be some sort of progress in decentralised curriculum development, whatever was found in the schools, and at that time I saw the research as a preparatory stage to curriculum development. I had been involved in Nuffield Science curriculum developments in the sixties, and by the mid-seventies my own personal view was that one needed, essentially, a needs analysis based upon some kind of survey of what was happening, so as to establish where the needs are greatest. There was, therefore, some control by the DES officials, around 1978, to delimit the enquiry, and the research took more of a descriptive role than I should have wished.

You make the point, in the Foreword to the report, about the descriptive aspect and the lack of comparative studies.

I was, through university resources, able to visit the United States on three occasions, looking at parenthood-related education, and I found those visits extremely valuable; but they couldn't in any sense

be properly woven into the research report, although I think that there is plenty we could learn. I do think that our discussions around this topic have reflected a British arrogance about our educational system, and one which, in this field, I don't believe is appropriate. To me, the report has given a much more objective base to what, I think, many people knew by hunch; and one or two people have commented that the last thing it should invoke is complacency!

You located some schools which seemed to be active in this area. What evidence did you have that these initiatives were having any practical effect upon the children?

There were some marked differences of view within the research team about what should be done in relation to this aspect. The team members were selected on technical, not ideological, grounds, to try to get a mixture of backgrounds. I didn't want people who were just "educators". I knew, from the start, that there were immense technical problems about doing a "before and after" evaluation in terms of children's abilities, skills, and attitudes, but from my personal point of view we did less on that than I would have liked. On the other hand, there weren't the technical instruments available, although there are one or two in America. Perhaps, from the point of view of a fully-comprehensive piece of *research*, the whole thing was over-ambitious. However, I always saw it — and I think the DES always saw it — as a piece of work directed to inform policy; in the end, I think that is what it has been. Some of my colleagues on the research team possibly saw it as a "purer" exercise.

You went into five LEAs in some detail. Do you think that your enquiries and interest prompted them to reassess their attitudes?

It's very difficult to say. You're asking the classic question: as soon as you do a piece of social research, are you changing the animal you're looking at? We'd be naive to say that we're sure we *didn't*

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change the animal, but I don't personally think that it was changed very much; I don't think the local authorities quickly got their act together in order to please us! That would have accorded the research a very high status, the status of a national commission like the Plowden Report, and I don't think the educational system changes that fast. Perhaps I'm cynical, but apart from one or two authorities I think that the research was just one more of those enquiries that somebody seems to fund and that officers have to reply to: they know it isn't going to change the world. I think it's interesting that out of these five LEAs, to whom I sent a copy of the report, I've had only one acknowledgment — although I know that it was read in another one, because they later organised an in-service day, at which I spoke. However, in relation to comments like that, one does know that all the LEAs have been through horrendous problems about keeping roofs over heads, and so the last twelve months have not been a very fertile time for innovation in the curriculum.

But when your team was actually in the schools, did you get the feeling that they were generating ideas, that the staff were responding?

Well, as far as I am aware, my team handled the relationships involved satisfactorily, and created an unthreatening climate — but schools get lots of visitors,

don't they, and ours were birds of passage, although we did stay much, much longer than the average researcher. I don't think it sparked off any great new movements. Perhaps that will be the case for any kind of study. You have a few staff who have shown a high profile in order for the school to be recognised as one which is doing something, and my hunch is that in the majority of schools you could say that it's two or three staff who spark the interest, and have maybe one or two other colleagues who are associated a little bit with the development. But, since this is not a conventional school subject, it becomes a status question, to which I think the report does draw attention.

Has your view changed, during the course of the work?

One difficulty which I had throughout the research, and which I know the research team felt very strongly, was that I had declared myself as something of an advocate for this area of work, going back to 1971 or 1972 — and I had been triggered to write a book called *Education for Family Life* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1980) just around the time that the research started. So, wearing a research hat meant that I had to subdue my advocacy, and I've tried to be quite scrupulous about that. But, in terms of my views changing, I think I was personally surprised by the range of school subjects that teachers claimed to contain something relevant — how these words "preparation for parenthood" rang bells, however tiny, in more teachers' heads than I would have imagined. The fact that local authorities hadn't thought through any policy, or hadn't even got close to any clear definition of what this was about, was again a surprise, for I thought that we might find more authorities where advisers had worked through things in quite a lot of detail. But, again, I'm an eternal optimist, and I should probably have known from my own experience here in Gloucestershire as a parent.

A key element in post-war development of "preparation for parenthood"

in Britain is what was done in Gloucestershire in the late sixties, and which still, in a small way, continues under the umbrella of the Gloucestershire Association for Family Life (GAFL) which was initially assisted by Kenneth David, when he was the Adviser for Social and Personal Relationships. There seem fewer signs of these developments now.

I actually believe that this area, sensitive, difficult, and complex though it is, has a higher priority than anything else for the education service, and I speak as a renegade school science teacher. I feel that it is about time that we moved on from the pleas within government-associated reports, and either take this thing seriously, or don't do it at all. There is, relatively, a handful of teachers doing some very interesting work, against all the odds, with little acknowledgment, little status, and little or no training. I think that our report says: Look, this is what's going on in schools, set against a background of what important reports like the Court Report have said. Now — is it on our agenda, in a serious sense, as is computer education, or education for industrial awareness, which *have* impacted schools markedly over the past few years? Or is the field of the "home" within the curriculum just a thing that a few people bring out of a hat now and then? It is delicate, and it's delicate in more than just a content sense, including how a school might negotiate with its local community about what could and should be included in this area, and how it should be taught, and by whom it should be taught. The "by whom", of course, raises an area of concern for the teachers' unions, because I think that those teachers who have gone any way along the road in doing sensitive things in this area perceive that it *must* thrust a curricular bridge between home and school, with all the complications that such a thing involves.

What reactions have you had, since the report was published?

Very little, although there may have been a problem in getting the report disseminated into the right hands. There's been

much less interest among the responsible media than I would have imagined.

I did put up a proposal to the DES, last October or November, to establish some kind of national centre for Family Life Education in Schools – analogous to the Moral Education Centre at Lancaster, which has a DES direct grant to keep it going. But the proposal was turned down by Sir Keith Joseph on the grounds that I had not given him any proof that the local authorities would make use of such a centre, and that, if they did, then they should pay for it! So I've now asked if the DES has any other ideas in mind for forwarding the issues. Now that I'm at The Save the Children Fund I would like to be kept informed of any initiatives, so that we can harmonise our developments;

for I'm hoping that Save the Children will be investing some of its resources in this kind of work in the UK.

My hunch is that political circles now appreciate the delicacy of the whole area, and the to-ings and fro-ings that there were on "families" during the last election have shown political leaders of all complexions that family issues can be dynamite, and by no means a certain vote-catcher; perhaps, if not handled well, a vote-alienator. But, meanwhile, our society continues to suffer in social terms, because most people do not have the information and skills, or resources, surrounding the life-decisions that they are making about mating and procreation, which affect their lives more than any other decisions ever do.

Richard Whitfield, formerly Professor of Education and Head of the Department of Educational Enquiry at The University of Aston in Birmingham, is now Director of Child Care at The Save the Children Fund.