

RACE GROUP REPORT

The group was active in March when the Metropolitan Police Statistics, which had a race breakdown, were published (see elsewhere in this Newsletter). These were widely used in the media and by the police to exaggerate black involvement in crime and is part of a well orchestrated campaign to fight back after the Scarman Report. We were approached by the GLC police subcommittee via the grapevine a week before the figures were published and discussed how the statistics could be criticised. London Weekend Television's programme SKIN gave over the whole programme to the crime statistics a week later and we took part in this. The speed with which these things happen underlines the necessity to be either well prepared or able to drop everything to participate!

We have been discussing the second edition of Britain's Black Population and whether or not we want to work on this and how much work, if any, we can do. We feel it is very important that new members join the group if we are going to go on with it. Please write to us if you can help. We will hold a meeting soon to discuss this.

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HEALTH GROUP REPORT

Claims made about the status of the drugs project in the last two newsletters have turned out in retrospect to be incorrect. We have not yet met, nor has a draft paper based on work done so far been written. This is all about to change, however. A meeting has been arranged for June 29 at London School of Hygiene after the RSS Medical Section meeting i.e. about 6.15 pm. Martin Bland has undertaken to produce a draft by then. We were criticised at the AGM that what we have done up to now and presented at last year's Institute of Statistician's conference was not, in itself, very radical. This may well be the case, but it was intended as the first step in something wider. The object of the June meeting is to discuss where to go next, and it is hoped that people who have not been involved up to now will either come or contact Martin Bland (18 Porden Road, London SW2, Tel 01 274 3904).

The second edition of 'The unofficial guide to official health statistics' is selling quite well, probably largely because of a mailing Sheila Adam sent out to Health Authorities. One of the Radical Health Visitors Group had suggested that we do a similar mailing to Schools of Nursings. Has anyone got any suggestions for any other mailing lists we might use? A point that is obvious is that while we intended the pamphlet to be above all for Community Health Councillors and health services trades unionists, we have been more successful in getting it to the former than to the latter.

The next Health Group publication, which has the snappy title 'Two statistical methods for assessing health hazards at work: a guide to occupational cohort studies' is in the final stages (honest!) of preparation for printing, and may with luck be published in June/July. It is intended to distribute it via the PDC's and TU Book Service. Suggestions for other ways of/contacts for publicising it would be welcomed by David Jones (01-644-0515) 18 Gloucester Gardens, Sutton, Surrey, SM1 3EY.

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RADICAL STATISTICS EDUCATION SUB-GROUP PAMPHLET

Everything you always wanted to know about educational research
but were too busy with education to ask

'I keep six honest serving men
They taught me all I knew
Their names are Which and Where and When
And How and Why and Who!

Rudyard Kipling

Just So Stories

The education sub-group is at last about to produce its pamphlet. This is as yet untitled though we have a number of quite reasonable possibilities. My own personal favourite 'Responsibility in Education Research', or 'We Plowden the fields and scatter' seemed insufficiently weighty by the time I had sobered up again.

The pamphlet is about educational research, and the direct and indirect ways it influences what happens in the classroom.

We have written it for an audience of 'consumers' or, some would say, 'victims' of educational research results: teachers, administrators, parents, researchers, school governors, trainee teachers, lecturers in education and related disciplines and indeed anyone who is interested in education.

Many people are bored, confused or downright dismissive of educational research, which seems to produce results that to practitioners are either obvious, or nonsense (or both) dressed up in incomprehensible jargon and obscure statistical techniques. The reaction is often just to ignore it as a specialised intellectual activity with no relevance to the everyday business of educating the young people in their charge.

However such blithe dismissiveness can have dire consequences. Parents suddenly find that their own small local school which they know and approve of is to be closed and amalgamated with a larger school some distance away; teachers discover that their working practices are being checked up on more closely; or teacher's unions are told that class size makes no difference and that, if anything, pupils do better in large classes. All these are findings which can be supported by the results of particular pieces of educational research.

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The pamphlet outlines two types of approaches, the first of which may be described as statistical responsibility and the second as the demystifying approach. In both of these approaches we look at three important and influential studies, namely Neville Bennett's 'Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress', Rutter et al's 'Fifteen Thousand Hours' and the National Children's Bureau study 'Progress in Secondary Schools', as well as their critics.

The first perspective looks more at technical, that is statistical and methodological, points. We recognise that there is a tendency for the discussion of issues of substance to get bogged down in technical discussions of the appropriateness of a particular statistical procedure, with the result that those affected by the results of the research feel unable to comment. Statistical procedures can be specialised and complex, and there is of course no unique touchstone to enable a reader to gain an instant assessment of a piece of research, or the criticism levelled against it. However we do put forward a checklist of questions which at least give a start in helping one know where to look in order to decide whether a particular well-publicised research merits attention and whether criticism is soundly based or simply petty and partisan.

The second perspective is more concerned with theoretical and broadly political questions and helps to explain why in research using the supposedly scientific body of knowledge of statistics there should still be such controversy that our list of technical questions should be necessary. We argue that education research needs to be considered as a social product, influenced, perhaps unconsciously, at all stages from conceptualisation to its impact on education practice by the preconceptions and interests of those concerned.

We also present a second set of questions which we consider are necessary to pose about any piece of research, in addition to the purely statistical.

We wrote this pamphlet for those involved in education as we realise that educational research results are often used to silence the expression of legitimate concerns by those wishing to speak up for their own interests.

The use of 'statistics' and 'computers' to produce such results is often thought to lend an aura of invincibility to research results so that those wishing to question the results are made to feel ashamed of their ignorance.

It is socially acceptable to be baffled and bemused by numbers. This is a sad state of affairs and means that large sections of the population feel unable to challenge decisions made on the basis of expert technical advice. We hope that people with no more than basic mathematical skills who are interested in educational research will be able to apply our ideas when the results from the next project hit the headlines :
'NEW RESEARCH SHOWS'... does it?

We aim to publish in early October : the pamphlet will contain about 32-40 pages, and will sell for as little as possible (£1 to £1.50).

If you wish to comment on the final draft, please send s.a.e. urgently to

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Please mark your envelope (not your s.a.e.) Radical Statistics Education Group.

A donation of £2.00 to cover photocopying would be appreciated.

If anyone would be able to make the Group a loan to help us publish it, we should be most grateful.