

The latest contribution by John Marks and Caroline Cox (joined this time by Maciej Pomian-Srzednicki) to the statistical debate about examination results in different types of school was published yesterday. It is written in the provocative style which they have chosen to make their own, interspersing partisan political comment with statistical analysis. This time, perhaps, they have taken more trouble to cover their tracks with qualifying statements, but there is still a world of difference between the stance they have adopted and that of most investigators.



EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT

The second thoughts of the DES also acknowledge the representativeness of the NCES sample, the validity of the statistical techniques used, and the value of the findings for parents seeking to evaluate the quality of education available.

The future of secondary education is not a closed book with "comprehensive" on the cover. It should be an open book in which new things can be written to meet new needs that are now, no great thanks to the prevailing orthodoxy, beginning to be recognized. The prejudice of the DES does not assist the process of useful discussion.



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2 That a number of prominent educational researchers have been involved with the Radical Statistics Group, an offshoot of the Marxist pressure group, the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science. These include, for example, Professor Harvey Goldstein (member, DES Advisory Group for the NCB research) and Dougal Hutchinson (NCB statistician) who assisted in preparing *Demystifying Social Statistics* (Pluto Press, 1979), a publication which was inspired by the Radical Statistics Group and whose authors and helpers contain many members of the Marxist left in the social and natural sciences; in addition to Goldstein and Hutchinson, Ken Fogelman and Jane Steedman of the NCB and John Gray assisted in the writing of the Radical Statistics Group publication *Reading between the Numbers* (BSSRS, 1982). This claims to be a critical guide to educational research and is, perhaps unsurprisingly, extremely kind to the NCB's own *Progress in Secondary Schools* but is strongly critical of Bennett's *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* and Rutter's *15,000 Hours*;

Education: Strange Days Indeed

As the quotes above indicate, 1983 was a year of perhaps unprecedented excitement in policy debates on education, especially that to do with the organisation and effectiveness of secondary schooling. Earlier results that seemed to justify a non-selective system as being roughly as effective as a selective one, were called into question by a publication in June from a group calling itself the National Council for Education Standards (NCES). Their claims in turn were scrutinised by a number of statisticians and research workers who in general were critical of the work (e.g. Gray and Jones in the TES, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) Research Section). In particular because of important potential policy implications, DES statisticians were asked to assess the NCES finding internally, and their critical judgements were leaked to the Guardian and other newspapers in September.

The DES statisticians were sharply criticised by the NCES and, it was alleged in the Times leader quoted above, eventually climbed down. About the same time two of the authors of the NCES publication launched an attack on a sizeable part of the educational research community (including the Radical Statistics Education Group) naming several in a tirade (quoted above, in Education, a weekly read by educational researchers and administrators).

We can begin the story with the publication of Progress in Secondary Schools by the National Children's Bureau (NCB), based on the National Child Development Study (NCDS). This study was commissioned by the DES in 1977 under a Labour government, and reported to a Conservative government in 1980

The study looked at a large number of measures of 'success' of schooling, such as truancy and attitudes towards school, where it found a mixed pattern. Perhaps inevitably, however, the results which occasioned the greatest interest were those on standardised test scores on maths and reading. These showed that there was no statistically significant difference between selective and non-selective schools in test scores at 16 after making allowance for the measured ability of the intake at age 11.

The study was well received in the press, which concentrated attention on the finding that high ability (top fifth) pupils did as well in comprehensives as in grammar schools.

The findings were unsensational but given that the topic was one of considerable sensitivity, the NCB might equally easily have found itself under attack from the left or the right.

In the event, it was the right wing that struck. (For an indication of criticisms from the left, see Reading Between the Numbers Radical Statics Education Group 1982). Caroline Cox and John Marks, under the aegis of the Centre for Policy Studies, a Tory 'think tank' founded by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher in the early 1970s, produced a vitriolic critique under the title Real Concern. This was remarkable, equally for its lack of statistical awareness and for the intemperateness of its language. An example of both of these is their description of standard techniques of regression adjusted for intake as 'doctoring the data'. The NCB published a refutation, Real Research, and also considered the possibility of legal action for deformation before deciding that for the time being such action would be difficult to reconcile with the NCB's charitable status.

In the same week as the CPS issued its press release, another organisation with an impressive sounding title, The National Council for Educational Standards, also issued a press release making remarkably similar comments, but giving no details of its provenance or composition.

In due course some of the remainder of the educational research community became involved, and despite at least one threat of legal action by Cox and Marks, the tenor of the articles was generally favourable to the NCB's methods and dismissive of Cox and Marks.

A second report from the NCB, on the same sample, but this time using public examination results which had not been available earlier at the time of Progress, rather than standardised tests, was published in June 1983. The findings were essentially the same as those based on standardised tests.

Meanwhile the debate continued. In September 1982, the Radical Statistics Education Group published Reading Between the Numbers : a critical guide to educational research. This was generally well received, and attracted some constructive criticism from the educational research community. Besides scrutinising the NCB research, Reading Between the Numbers critically assessed the Neville Bennett research Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress (1976) (which argued for the superiority of "formal"

over "informal" primary teaching styles) and the research by Michael Rutter et al., Fifteen Thousand Hours (1979), which argued for the importance of school 'ethos' (rather than, inter alia, resources) in promoting secondary pupil attainment, etc.. In addition, we addressed the qualities of "statistical responsibility": looking at the Cox and Marks comments on the 1980 NCB research, it was argued that their work had failed to meet a number of criteria for 'responsible' criticism.

Over this whole period, of course, the issue of resources was brought into relief by public concern over the effect of the cuts in education, as in other areas of public provision. Her Majesty's Inspectorate expressed their concern, too, in a number of reports (published approximately yearly - most recently in July 1983 for 1982, and available free from the DES). In addition, the DES produced an analysis which examines the importance of resources at the LEA level (leaked to the TES of 12 December, 1982 - and to be discussed at the Royal Statistical Society Social Statistics Section meeting on 20 March at the London School of Hygiene).

Meanwhile John Gray, Andrew McPherson and David Raffe of Edinburgh University published Reconstructions of Secondary Education, based to a great extent on Scottish data. One of its main findings was that the exam results in 'uncreamed' comprehensives were essentially the same as the results in other schools. And Marks and Cox (with the help of a third person - hence 'MCP') popped up again - this time under the imprint of NCES (see above) to claim that their own work Standards in English Schools (1983) showed that:

1. There were wide variations in exam results between LEAs which have similar average school intakes in terms of children in semi-skilled and unskilled social class groups.
2. LEAs with a high proportion of children in selective schools obtained better results than LEAs with high proportions of children in comprehensive schools.
3. High expenditure and better pupil teacher ratios did not lead to better exam results.

The main criticisms of this work have been that

1. Background variables were not adequately controlled for because:
 - (i) LEAs are not homogeneous: many contain a range of schools with differing social class mix, no analysis at the LEA level could take account of these within - LEA differences;
 - (ii) the 3 LEA groups defined by MCP each contained very dissimilar LEAs;
 - (iii) by isolating low occupational classes (Groups 4 and 5) rather than high occupational classes (Groups 1 and 2) MCP had failed to isolate differences between authorities which the DES itself had chosen in their own work to relate to exam results; thus, the three groups chosen by MCP overlapped substantially in their proportion of high occupational class children.

2. It was doubtful that the sample was representative nationally, since: (i) it was a "volunteer" sample and (ii) of the LEAs only 56 out of 96 LEAs and a smaller proportion of schools responded to MCP's request for data. Further, the anonymity of LEAs prevented a check on their representativeness.

These points were made by the DES, as well as other critics. The controversy is given urgency by the importance of the policy issues and by the "populist" manner (drawing on public resentment of "faceless civil servants") of attacking the DES statisticians. But also by the fact that M&C have applied to the DES for funds to "research more fully".

What is the significance of all this for educational research and for education, in Britain at this time? In this article, we must limit ourselves to posing a number of questions; the questions and possible responses to them will be discussed more fully at the Radical Statistics AGM (see elsewhere in this Newsletter). We group the issues involved into three areas:

- (a) political and ideological trends in Thatcherism's second term;
- (b) the role of the state; and
- (c) the role of the press.

(a) Political and Ideological Trends

- (i) What will happen to the provision of education in Thatcher's second term? (For some insights on this, see Ann Marie Wolfe and James Donald (eds.) Is there anyone here from education? Pluto Press 1983, esp Chs. 3, 4 and 6).
- (ii) How does Cox & Marks' work fit into the Thatcherite attack on state education? In particular, note the 'populist' move by C & M in apparently giving up on debates with expert opinion, and substituting an attempt to win over sections of the press (namely, The Times), and allegations of left-wing conspiracy as in the Education article (cited above).
- (iii) Does the 'discovery' of 'radicals'/'Marxists' in educational research, or in higher education (e.g. J. Gould, The Attack on Higher Education, 1977, to which Cox contributed), amount to a McCarthyite witch-hunt? Is the term 'Marxist' as they use it a 'ritual insult' (like 'positivist' as used in other contexts), a vacuous 'ideal type' (with no clear empirical referents, as in their contribution to Black Paper 1977), or is it something more dangerous to the basis of free and open discussion?

(b) The Role of the State

- (i) In the increasingly Secret Society, what distinctions among types of 'leaks' need making? Of course, many (most?) official leaks are made by members of the government themselves, sometimes to gauge public reaction to possible formulations of policy, sometimes to attempt to tip the balance in inter-governmental conflicts; some leaks from civil servants and

others in possession of not-yet-public knowledge are part of on-going relationships of "exchange" between these people and the press; finally, some 'leaks' are by civil servants who take substantial personal risks because of their commitment to the public's right to know (e.g. the leaking of the Heseltine memo to Thatcher about the Cruise Missile arrival date).

- (ii) How should the present spate of leaks be viewed and dealt with? It is of course absurd to suggest that MCP have been the only people to experience a leak from the DES (or other educational 'sources'): others have had findings from carefully conducted research appear in a garbled form, without warning, in the press. In the case of the leak about MCP's study, it is plausible that someone felt that the DES statisticians' report might be over-ridden by party political pressure towards funding NCES to do further work.

As has been said, "The British rule by withholding information". We should campaign for government to act by removing the necessity for leaks, rather than by trying to plug up those which do occur. How can Radstats support the 1984 Campaign for Freedom of Information?

- (iii) What protection can be given to civil servants from attacks in the press which they are bound not to answer; e.g. the Times account of the DES "second thoughts" (see above)? What protection can be given to civil servants who leak in support of the public's right to know?

(c) The Role of the Press

- (i) How do Cox and Marks manage to use the press so relatively well? They appear to have split the press on this issue with the Times on their side, and the TES and Education against. The flavour of their approach may be glimpsed from their taking the TES to the Press Council in protest at critical reviews (by Gray & Jones, 8 and 15 July 1983), while refusing the TES offer of 1200 words to refute the criticism. (The Press Council found there was "no case to answer" against the TES).
- (ii) Has The Times changed? A leader in October presented a positive review of the NCB's work on the NCDS up to age 16 (including presumably the work on non-selective and selective schooling discussed above); the leader in November (see above) promotes the MCP work, whose claims contradict the NCB findings. Does the existence of the MCP work facilitate the pushing of their views by right wing groups on the paper's editorial staff? Do the views of the new proprietor of The Times figure in all this?

Thus in 1984, will we see:

- fairer and less biased coverage of educational issues in The Telegraph than in The Times?
- the N.U.T. defending Keith Joseph for declining to fund further work by NCES?
- Radical Statistics defending DES statisticians?

Future Events

- 20 March - R.S.S. Social Stats. Section.
Barry Wakefield (DES) - resources and exam results in Schools.
John Gray (Univ. of Sheffield) - use of exam results in assessing school effectiveness.
- 24 March - Discussion of the issues raised above at the Radstats AGM.
- To be arranged? - Scrutiny of the NCES work at a Discussion Meeting of the R.S.S.

Education Group.

