

Race Group Report

The difference of opinion between ourselves and the Runnymede Trust over the content of the second edition of Britain's Black Population (see RS29) came to a head in a 3 hour meeting with Runnymede. Since we could not reach a compromise, we decided to agree to differ and hence to no longer work together. This leaves the Race Group with a partial draft of a book which is still to be called Britain's Black Population and published by Heinemann, though contractual agreements are not yet finalised.

We seem to be almost back to square one. Almost two years ago we were discussing whether or not we were prepared to work with Runnymede on the second edition. Many of us had reservations based on our experience in writing the first edition (see RS25). Those reservations proved right.

We are not quite back to square one. In the first place we are now free from the constraints of working with another group. In the second place we have a partial draft of a book. Time waits for no woman or man, however, and the new exciting update is rapidly becoming old hat even before it is written. Added to that, we are now less able to get the draft ready quickly because the split with Runnymede means more work for many RSRG authors: those of us who thought we had finished our first drafts now find that we have extra ground to cover. An added problem is the lack of an editor. Nevertheless the current deadline for delivery of the final manuscript to Heinemann is August. Does anyone think we'll make it?

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Health group

Our presentation to the Medical Section of the Royal Statistical Society on March 27 was successful in that it went down well and generated interest in the group. At the same time, it made us conscious of the length of time which has elapsed since we last produced anything new and of the need to get on with our plan to produce a pamphlet to supersede 'In defence of the NHS'.

This started with a working title of 'Health and the NHS', and after Christmas we started to try to work out a structure for it. As we did so, we sensed danger signals that we were setting out on just the sort of magnum opus which had defeated us in the past. As a next step, we decided to contemplate published data about the structure of the NHS on the one hand and the national ill health on the other.

At this stage we hit upon an idea which we hope will sidestep the problems of searching for a structure and trying to be comprehensive. What we decided to do was to compile a collection of common myths about the national health and to debunk them, presenting the relevant data or pointing to the lack of it. Rather than try to define a structure in advance, everyone was invited to contribute myths, which could then be grouped together in some suitable format at a later stage. This idea had an encouraging response, perhaps because it can involve people in different parts of the country without the need to come to meetings.

The subject of the 'national health', according to us, includes both the NHS and health issues. So on the one hand we have myths such as 'The Tories have increased NHS staffing levels', 'The NHS is inefficient and costs too much to administer' and 'Privatisation of ancillary services leads to greater efficiency' and on the other 'Cancer can be cured', 'No one dies from nuclear power', 'Health education can improve health by changing individual behaviour without reference to wider issues' and issues in occupational health. Many of the myths fall in between these two ends of the spectrum. For example we have 'The government couldn't afford a large reduction in smoking' and 'Hospital/home births are safer'.

If anyone who is not on the health group mailing list would like a more comprehensive list, please contact us. Also, although we have set a preliminary date of the end of June for first drafts, we should be highly pleased to get any further contributions from anyone else at a later stage. For the benefit of new readers, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the health group keeps in touch by means of mailings at 4-6 week intervals. If you would like to receive these, please send about 6 stamped addressed envelopes to Alison Macfarlane, 40 Warwick Road, St Albans, Herts. This is also the contact address for anyone who would like to take part in debunking the myths.



'Quicksand or not, Barclay, I've half a mind to struggle.'

EDUCATION GROUP

At the AGM in March, the Education group floated the idea of looking at the production and continued existence of educational myths: how some myths are supported by educational research and, especially, by certain kinds of statistical analyses and how others appear to be rejected by research but are still widely believed. The Health group are also thinking of a similar venture in their own area and it might be possible for the two groups to pool some of their thoughts and energies.

Here's a list of myths (would everyone agree that they are myths, indeed what is a myth - need for careful thinking early on) that we could examine critically with the aim of producing a document/pamphlet for the same audience as Reading Between the Numbers. RBTN was aimed at 'consumers' of educational research - teachers, parents, school governors, trainee teachers etc.

1. Educational standards are falling.
2. Pupils do better in large classes.
3. There is no relationship between educational spending and attainments.
4. Pupils do better in a selective secondary system.
5. Traditional teaching methods are better than progressive teaching methods in primary schools.
6. Mixed-age teaching is a bad thing.
7. Schools do not affect attainment.
8. Students with no formal qualifications are unsuitable for higher education.

We would need to look at the status of the myth - how it came about, how it is supported and by whom, and whether there is any evidence to support it. It would be good to aim for a document which is not just an attempt to knock all previous research, but also a guide to how appropriate research methods and statistics could be developed and used to answer at least some of the underlying questions about how education might be organised.

We would stress that these ideas are very tentative. But a project of this kind does need a group of people who are willing to put in a fair bit of work. If you think you would like to be included in this project, come to a meeting on 19 September at Thomas Coram Research Unit, 41 Brunswick Square, WC1 (278 2424) at 5.30 pm.

