Waiting for 1984

by Dorothy Berridge, S.H.C.J.

Psychologists working in the field of human development are understandably reluctant to make predictions. They prefer to work backwards, attempting to explain later behaviour in the light of earlier experience, but always aware of the multiple factors involved in the human situation and of the unreliability and inaccuracy of what has been recorded, often in retrospect. Reliable studies on a large enough scale are few and far between, especially in this country, while the increasing social and geographical mobility of the general population makes any longitudinal study over the years increasingly difficult to carry through.

Meanwhile, theories of child-rearing abound, varying not only from generation to generation but also according to the school of thought involved; more important, large sections of the population remain more or less untouched by such professional advice, even at the level of the popular women's journals, so that the mores of regional subcultures persist, despite the attempts of teachers and social workers with what are now recognized as essentially middle-class professional goals and expectations.

Nevertheless, one factor on which there is increasing agreement is the importance of the earliest years, of the pre-school period spent largely within the family setting. What evidence there is suggests real differences at work within the range of social class, which will facilitate or hamper the work of formal education during the next ten or more years the children will spend in school. What these differences really are, and how they can be met without distorting or destroying what is valuable at each level, still remains a matter of conjecture. We are fast moving towards both an egalitarian educational system and a technologically controlled society; it is the present generation in our schools today whose children will be growing up in the year 1984. How far will the way they are being brought up today affect the next generation? How much or how little do we really know?

On-going Research

Two recent studies undertaken in this country promise to provide us with far more reliable data than we have ever had access to before. Fortunately both are on-going projects, though each has had to struggle hard in its earliest years to ensure sufficient funds to keep

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb07408.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

going. One of these[1] is a nation-wide documentary study of all children born in Great Britain within one week in February, 1958, and whose behaviour and performance in school was followed up in detail seven years later. Already the information gained has been applied to the educational policy put forward by the Plowden Report[2]; the next round is already being planned for a follow-up at the age of eleven. We await its results with interest.

The present article, however, has been largely inspired by an equally valuable study[3]. This is a really fascinating account of the authors' survey of local child-rearing practices at present being undertaken by the Child Development Research Unit of the University of Nottingham. I had revelled in their first account[4], a measure of whose success was the speed with which this appeared in a Pelican edition[5]. My own personal satisfaction with it as a highly readable piece of empirical research in a much-needed area was heightened by the authentic flavour it communicated of the lore and language of the people of my own native city; this is reflected by the 'Glossary of Nottingham' terms thoughtfully provided in the Pelican edition for the uninitiated who might be floored by such local vocabulary as 'teggies' (for teeth), 'duddoes' (for sweets), or 'pods' (for the baby's bootees). The less infant-centred dialogue of the mothers of the four-year-olds is reminiscent of Sillitoe or D. H. Lawrence, and adds richness and colour to the 500 or more pages of the present volume.

This sense of 'genuineness', professional and local, was reflected in the glowing reviews the first book received in the appropriate medical and psychological journals, as well as in the *Nottingham Evening News*; the present volume deserves as high praise, if not more, for the shortcomings which emerged in the analysis of the original data have now been faced and overcome. For the 1963 study, 709 mothers of babies within two weeks of their first birthday were interviewed; data were collected over a period of two years, and a detailed schedule of interview questions was drawn up as an information finding procedure on the whole range of mother-child interaction from birth onwards. Most of the interviews were undertaken by the local Health Visitors, who, it was supposed, would have ready access to the homes, and the necessary skills in making contact. However, it soon emerged that the types of answer given to the supposed 'authorities' differed significantly from those given to the smaller group of university-based interviewers. This was itself an important

[1] *11,000 Seven-Year-Olds: First Report of the National Child Development Study (1958 Cohort)*, by M. L. Kellmer Pringle and others. Longmans, London, 1967.

[2] *Children and their Primary Schools*, H.M.S.O., London, 1967.

[3] *Four Years Old in an Urban Community*, by John and Elizabeth Newson. George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968.

[4] *Infant Care in an Urban Community*, by John and Elizabeth Newson. George Allen and Unwin, London, 1963.

[5] *Patterns of Infant Care in an Urban Community*, by John and Elizabeth Newson. Penguin Books, London, 1965.

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finding, and was especially true on such controversial issues as the use of a 'dummy' (pacifier), and on the frequency of bottle v. breast feeding. Working-class mothers particularly found it easier to 'pretend' to conform to the advice offered, than to argue, even when this conflicted with the local mores; middle-class mothers were more likely to be conforming to the advice given by child psychologists, for better or for worse.

Three Years On

One advantage of the follow-up study is that it allows us to check on how successful such 'expert' advice is; themselves parents of three young children, the Newsons are well aware of the discrepancies between the day-to-day reality and the professional 'image' of child development. No difference was found, for instance, in the success of toilet training by four years in terms of late v. early 'potting'; if anything, the early starters were at an advantage, contrary to the prognostications of many contemporary accounts. As with the breast v. bottle feeding issue, what does appear to be important is the confidence a given mother has in what she has chosen to do, and the way this enables her to interact with her child.

For the current study, only the university-based team of interviewers, themselves mothers of young children, were used, and gave evidence of making good contact with the local mums, even those initially reported as being poor interviewees. Extracts from the original tape-recorded material abound, enlivening the necessarily detailed interpretations and statistical analyses, and making it difficult to skip anything. Pseudonyms are used for both families and individuals, though typically local or Irish names are kept to enable the reader to place the mother concerned. One favourite source of quotation is given as a 'Mrs. Cullinan, the Irish labourer's wife whom we have quoted before . . . and shall quote again; we have a weakness for her almost biblical prose' (p. 115). Patrick, her four-year-old son, was the tenth in line, and would himself be followed by three younger children by the time the family were contacted for the next stage, the follow-up at seven years old. Small wonder that for mothers at the lower end of the social scale, with their larger families, meal-times were regarded less as a time for social interaction and intellectual stimulation than one of silent feeding.

> 'I have taught them all, all along, as well as Patrick, that I don't like a lot of talking at the table, I expect them to pass whatever is needed to one another. I don't like them to get into a big conversation about something that went on in the daytime, like. I like to keep the meals nice and quiet, and have it more enjoyed that way and respect it. The table is a place of peace and quiet for eating at' (p. 238).

This may also account for the smaller frequencies of verbal interaction at bedtime even when the night-prayers of the Catholic Irish

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families were added to the other practices of stories, nursery-jingles, etc. Here again, it is the middle-class child who is more favoured, though TV programmes, including advertising breaks (often the child's favourite) are filling a gap at this level in the experience of the working-class child.

As in the first study, significant differences emerge in the practices and attitudes of mothers according to their social background, but the researchers are quite firm in refusing to take sides and evaluate. They are quick to appreciate the genuine warmth and love which 'mums' of all classes are able to mediate to their young children, even in face of overwhelming odds, such as inadequate housing or lack of privacy, which force even the most sympathetic to compromise. They give many instances of the intuitive insight, of even the most uninformed mothers, into child-centred and democratic practices, for the undoubted raising of living standards in comparison with their own childhood has given opportunities to many working-class mothers to indulge their children as they never were themselves. Most reassuring is the reaction of many of those who have been able to move from the terraced houses of the urban sites to their suburban council houses, even though there is an inevitable 'cultural lag' in adaptation—one of the interesting hypotheses of the present study.

Attitudes to authority

One of the most important inter-class differences to emerge by this stage is the attitude to authority, particularly relevant to the present egalitarian trend in educational policy. The Newsons concluded after their first investigation that

> 'The classless society in Britain is still a long way off. Men may be born equal; but within its first month in the world, the baby will be adapting to a climate of experience that varies according to its family's social class' (p. 230).

If this was true at one month, it will be even more marked at four years, the last year before the child enters the formal world of school. Working-class children will by now, for example, have learned that the greatest of the traditional ten commandments is the eleventh, 'Thou shalt not be found out'; while their contemporaries from a professional family will have been trained to tell the truth and own up.

> 'The difference in attitude is nicely highlighted by the answers (on this issue of expecting children to own up) of two mothers in Class II and III; the wife of a teacher says, quietly, 'Oh yes, certainly'; a lorry driver's wife gives a short laugh, and answers, 'No—well, she'd be a fool if she did, wouldn't she?' (p. 445).

The question that immediately springs to mind is how this affects the Catholic child in the lower working-class sector of the population. How far is his sense of guilt a pragmatic rather than an interiorized

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one, and how far is this taken into account by the sort of teaching he will get at his Catholic school? How mature will his conscience be by the time he reaches seven years, the traditional 'age of reason', and how ready will he be for making his first confession at this age? The Newsons' follow-up of seven-year-olds had begun by the time the present book was being written. We look forward to its findings for many reasons—not the least for the sort of information we badly need for our pre-catechesis of Catholic children and their families. I hope that many priests and teachers (and not only those in Nottingham itself) will read this book. These latter can expect to figure in the next stage of the enquiry, as the child moves out of the immediate family circle into that of the school and the parish and into the increasingly imminent world of 1984.

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