Poverty and Education

Freya Headlam

Why do many poor children do badly at School? What special kinds of problems do they have at school and at home? Why are they more likely to leave school early, less likely to go on to do any further education? What opportunities exist, and what use is made of them? How could existing educational services be changed or new services created so as to give them a fairer, better deal?

An ACER empirical study of young people entitled 'Poverty, Education, and Adolescents' will try to find some answers in this extremely complex field. The study is part of the Commonwealth Commission of Enquiry into Poverty, which was expanded in early 1973 to include the areas of law, welfare and health, economic aspects, and education. Ron Fitzgerald of ACER was appointed Education Commissioner, with the task of collecting evidence and sponsoring and setting up studies to investigate connections between education and poverty. The ACER project is directed by Ron Fitzgerald and is being carried out by Alan Wright and Freya Headlam. It also forms part of a wider ACER program which is looking into various aspects of life-long education both in Australia, and overseas, and into the social implications (es-pecially in the field of labour) which are involved.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

A major aim is to throw more light on the nature and extent of educational disadvantage in Australia: the kinds of factors involved, whether they are causes or symptoms of the trouble, how they operate to limit the life chances of the poor, how they could be overcome or avoided.

Some handicaps arising from poverty are obvious. Poor quality cramped housing means distraction for children trying to do their homework. Boys often need to take part-time jobs to supplement the low family income, while girls may spend a lot of time on housework or minding younger brothers and sisters. When both parents work they may be too busy or harassed to provide enough stimulus or support for their children. Family strains and depressing surroundings use up much of a child's mental and emotional energy, reducing the ability and desire to learn. If the language used at home is different to that used at school, a child faces further obstacles to educational progress. Overseas research has shown the overwhelming influence of a poor environment; in this study we will try to examine the process in the Australian scene.

Less visible but increasingly seen as crucial is what we might call the child's psychological environment: the attitudes, aspirations and expectations of his parents and teachers, his own opinion of himself (self-concept), his own desires and expectations. From an educational viewpoint the most relevant of these are teachers' attitudes. Parents' attitudes have proved hard to change. Moreover, while seeing closer contact and understanding between parents and teachers as highly desirable, determined efforts to change parental attitudes can be questioned on ethical grounds. On the other hand teacher attitudes do fall within the educational frame of reference, and can be changed. Dr Stephen Wiseman, one-time Director of Britain's National Foundation for Educational Research, has termed the demonstration of the power of teacher attitudes and expectations 'the single most significant outcome of educational research in the last decade' (i.e. the sixties). Here then we have an area for action and grounds for optimism.

METHODS

Obtaining evidence in the psychological area is time-consuming and

difficult. Attitudes are notoriously difficult to measure accurately or fully. Increasingly researchers view questionnaire/survey methods as too crude to be appropriate instruments to use in this field.

We are therefore making use of two kinds of research method: starting with the broad, quantitative and analytical, following on with the in-depth, qualitative and descriptive.

As a basis we are drawing on a body of data from the IEA surveys conducted by ACER, derived from thousands of questionnaires given to Australian school children in 1970 and 1972. From these we have selected a small sample (about 200) and are adopting a case study approach involving one- to two-hour individual interviews. While these will be structured to enable us to make comparisons, as many questions as possible will be open-ended to lower the risk of predetermining the answers.

In this way we hope to investigate more closely where these adolescents now stand in relation to formal education and way of life. We believe that their educational experiences and needs cannot be understood in a vacuum, and thus want to get as complete a picture of their lives as possible.

The design of the study will involve comparing educational 'achievers' and 'non-achievers' from poor and middle class backgrounds. How do poor children who do well at school differ from poor children who don't? What do 'achievers' from any social level have in common? By this means we hope to understand more about factors making for success or failure.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

The relationship between educational disadvantage and poverty cannot be seen as a simple direct causal one. Rather, as Professor Halsey says of U.S. thinking, 'educational underachievement has become merely one manifestation of a series of social and economic disparities experienced by disadvantaged groups'. Nor can we ignore the ways in which education often seems to work to preserve such inequalities.

Nevertheless, we believe that education has an important role to play. In our final report, therefore, we will try to keep such broader implications in mind while making recommendations as to how Australian education could serve poor children better. Proposals will aim for greater equality and flexibility in such aspects as provision, access, and use. The creation of new kinds of service may be indicated. In the important field of further education we will suggest ways in which a return to education later in life could be a practicable undertaking for most people, not (as at present) an onerous business possible only for a few.

Many of our proposals will arise from what the young people themselves tell us about their experiences and needs. On a wider scale, most educators concerned with minority groups would like to see this kind of principle underlying the entire Australian education system—a system designed to benefit all types of people. At present those who can make best use of educational services are the middle-class, the 'good students' who can accept the school ethos, the tertiary-orientated. The goal is a system which recognizes the educational rights of all kinds of Australians, and caters for their various talents, interests, desires, and needs.

Pre-school Enrolments

Marion de Lemos

ACER has undertaken an analysis of pre-school enrolment figures in Victoria.

The purpose of the analysis was to obtain more detailed information on pre-school facilities in different areas of Victoria, and to compare facilities in country and metropolitan areas and in different geographic and socio-economic areas.

While state-wide figures on pre-school enrolments are available, there is little information on the relative proportion of pre-school enrolments in country and metropolitan areas of Australia, or in different socio-economic areas.

In this analysis the total pre-school enrolments for 1969 in each local government area in Victoria were compared with the 1970 school enrolment figures for children under 6 years of age. The rationale for this was that the total pre-school enrolments would provide an indication of the pre-school facilities available in each local government area, and this figure could be compared with the total eligible population defined as the estimated number of children entering school the following year in the same local government area.

The 1969 pre-school enrolment figures were supplied by the Maternal and Child Welfare Branch of the Department of Health, while the 1970 school enrolment figures for children under 6 years were taken from the figures published by the Victorian Office of the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics in 'Primary and Secondary Education 1970'. The 'under 6' age group was assumed to approximate the number of children entering school in that year.

The results of this analysis indicated that in Victoria in 1969, pre-school facilities were available for approximately 60 per cent of the eligible population, defined as those children going on to school the following year.

In country areas pre-school facilities were available for 63 per cent of the eligible population, while in metropolitan areas facilities were available for 59 per cent of the eligible population.

In the metropolitan area there were wide differences in the pre-school facilities available in different local government areas, ranging from 13 per cent in the Preston area to over 100 per cent in the Hawthorn, Camberwell and Sandringham areas.

In general there was a tendency for the provision of pre-school facilities to be higher in the eastern and south-eastern areas, and lower in the northern and western areas.

There was also a relationship between pre-school facilities and the socio-economic status of the area, with high socio-economic areas having a better provision than low socio-economic areas. This pattern was not however consistent, particularly in the inner suburban areas which tended to have high pre-school enrolments despite their low socio-economic status.

In country areas also pre-school enrolments show considerable variation from area to area. Enrolments are particulary high in the Wimmera area (93 per cent) but otherwise do not show very much variation between the major statistical divisions.

Play centre enrolments tend to be higher in the country areas than in the metropolitan areas, but overall constitute only a small proportion of total pre-school enrolments.

The detailed results of this study are published in ACER's Occasional Paper No. 7 *Pre-School Enrolments in Victoria* by Marion M. de Lemos.

New Programs and Materials

General information obtained by ACER staff has indicated an increasing awareness among teachers of a need for systematic programs of activities in the area of social and emotional development but at the same time an increasing awareness of the need for systematic instruction in fundamental skills. A particular perception of the role of language in learning is perhaps a key aspect influencing modes of teaching and organization for learning. This perception is the basis of some new teaching kits imported by ACER. The materials are *Developing Understanding of Self and Others* (DUSO D-1 and D-2) both by American Guidance Services (AGS).

Both programs are based on the premise that every child, in the process of growing up, is confronted with normal developmental problems. It is an integral part of the teacher's role today to help children learn to deal with these problems. Children must develop feelings of personal adequacy and self-acceptance in order for them to respond in a positive way to the whole educative process. To be most effective in this crucial, communicative role, the DUSO kits provide the teacher with programs of planned experiences and materials to encourage children to talk about and become more aware of their feelings, goals, values, and behaviour.

The DUSO programs are presented in concise teacher's manuals, each containing more than enough activities for a school year. In each program, eight themes are developed through thirty-three weekly cycles of planned experiences and materials with specific guidelines for day-to-day activities. The manuals are designed to provide maximum usefulness, with a minimum of preparation time. Overall flexibility allows teachers to select the activities most appropriate for each group of children. The wide variety of materials in each program also allows the teacher to vary the approach for her convenience as well as to heighten the children's interest. Supplementary activity suggestions in such areas as art, music, and games are also provided. Supplementary reading suggestions based on the eight unit themes are listed for the teacher's reference.

DUSO D-1 (Kindergarten to Grades 2 or 3)

The activities of this program have been designed to achieve three basic goals: *learning more words for feelings; learning that feelings, goals, values, and behaviour are dynamically related; learning to talk more freely about feelings, goals, values, and behaviour.*

EIGHT MAJOR UNIT THEMES OF D-1:

1. Understanding and Accepting Self
2. Understanding Feelings
3. Understanding Others
4. Understanding Independence
5. Understanding Goals and Purposeful Behaviour
6. Understanding Mastery, Competence, and Resourcefulness
7. Understanding Emotional Maturity
8. Understanding Choices and Consequences

MATERIALS: ■ Manual ■ 2 Story Books ■ 33 Posters with Easel ■ 21 Records or 5 Cassettes ■ 6 Hand Puppets ■ 11 Puppet Props ■ 2 Character Puppets—Duso and Flopsie ■ 33 Puppet Activity Cards ■ 5 Group Discussion Cards ■ 33 Role Playing Activity Cards

DUSO D-2 (Grades 2 or 3 to Grades 4 or 5)

The D-2 program challenges the growing, learning child with five basic goals: *to develop understanding and positive valuing of one's unique self; understanding of interpersonal relationships; understanding the purposive nature of human behaviour; understanding of dynamic interrelationships among ideas, feelings, beliefs, and behaviour in order to express one's feelings accurately; and understanding of competence and the components of accomplishment.*

EIGHT MAJOR UNIT THEMES OF D-2:

1. Toward Self-Identity
2. Toward Friendship
3. Toward Responsible Interdependence
4. Toward Self-Reliance
5. Toward Resourcefulness and Purposefulness
6. Toward Competence
7. Toward Emotional Stability
8. Toward Responsible Choice Making

MATERIALS: ■ Manual ■ 33 Posters with Easel ■ 17 Records or 5 cassettes ■ 6 Hand Puppets ■ 2 Character Puppets—Duso and Coho ■ 33 Puppet Activity Cards ■ 33 Discussion Pictures ■ 6 Discussion Guide

Cards ■ 8 Self and Social Development Activity Cards ■ 33 Career Awareness Activity Cards ■ 33 Role Playing Activity Cards

ACER is sole Australian agent for American Guidance Services, the publisher of *DUSO D-1* and *DUSO D-2*. Manuals of *DUSO D-1* and *DUSO D-2* are available on loan from Advisory Services Library but full kits are not lent or sent on approval.

GOLDMAN-LYNCH SOUNDS AND SYMBOLS DEVELOPMENT KIT

The Goldman-Lynch Sounds & Symbols Development Kit is a complete program of activities designed to stimulate production of the speech sounds and recognition of their associated symbols.

Created for ages 4½ through to 9 in either individual or group settings, the Goldman-Lynch program may be used for speech therapy, speech improvement, early phonics training, and as an introduction to reading.

The program teaches both phonic attack skills and auditory-visual discrimination skills, as well as promoting learning that is basic to the child's academic success in school.

The Goldman-Lynch program is based on the concept that an awareness of speech sounds can best be developed in children through both visual and auditory stimulation. The activities teach children to recognize visual symbols in a modified alphabet and their associated auditory counterparts. The program also assists youngsters to understand and use the sounds of language in their various relationships in words, sentences, and contextual speech.

The kit has been designed for use by both professionals and guided supportive personnel. Although lesson length and frequency will vary according to individual group needs, 30- to 40-minute sessions should be adequate for class settings of normal children.

The program is highly structured, sequentially arranged, and designed to facilitate instruction intended not only to stimulate speech sound production and associated symbol recognition, but to provide additional learning activities:

1. Auditory and visual discrimination and memory training
2. Integration of sounds into words and sentences
3. Building a vocabulary that is common to most reading programs
4. Language order training (the order of sounds, syllables, words, and sentences)

In addition to these basic skills, the Goldman-Lynch program is designed to assist the child to develop an increased appreciation for language.

A copy of the kit *Manual* which gives full details on the material is available on loan from the Advisory Services Library at ACER. Kits are not available 'on approval'.

Item Bank

John Foyster

The item banks being developed co-operatively by the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Australian departments of Education (the project is outlined in ACER Newsletter, No. 18, September 1973) have had as their main concern, at this early stage in the project, the production of multi-choice questions of the highest possible quality. In this progress report, some details of the procedures used to produce these questions are given.

Almost all of the questions to be used in the banks have been written at workshops by teachers with considerable experience in teaching the subjects concerned at the appropriate level (for the present banks, grade 10). These workshops have been held in various states around Australia, to ensure that the questions which finally appear in the banks are relevant to the different state curricula.

Subsequently the questions have been edited at ACER by groups of teachers seconded to ACER by State Departments. This editing process consists of an initial vetting of each individual question by one of the seconded teachers, a discussion of a collection of the questions, usually 35-50, by three or four of the teachers together with an ACER staff member, and then a second editing of each question by another of the seconded teachers who has been present at the panel meeting. These editing processes remove obvious errors (and some which are not so obvious), improve grammatical constructions, impose certain standard forms (for example, all questions have 4 alternatives), and annotate and modify diagrams.

In this early stage some measure of consistency between the items is produced as a result of the editing being done by a small number of editors. Later in the editing process, decisions have been made about terminology in order to minimize the difficulties which might arise, say, as a result of a child in Western Australia attempting to answer a question written in Tasmania and edited by a South Australian (to give an example of what actually happens).

Just before the items are assembled into trial forms, they are edited twice more. These additional checks have usually proved to be worthwhile in the past, and certainly the item bank questions have also benefitted from this inspection. The trial forms are loosely organized by topic so that (i) children are not forced to work in greatly different areas, but also (ii) no child is forced to work only on questions to which there may be a topic-centred aversion.

The trials will be held in September-October, 1974, and this should make it possible for data on each question to be available early in 1975.