

1998 Annual Conference

26-29 March

Brighton Conference Centre

Associate Editors: Fiona Jones and David Giles

Education and the disadvantaged: Is there any justice?

THIS year's Award for Challenging Inequality of Opportunity 1997-1998 recognizes Tommy MacKay, Honorary Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Strathclyde University, for his work in the areas of disability, gender and social class.

In his address, he reviewed movements towards greater justice throughout the history of statutory education, but highlighted his present concerns regarding the provision of education to the disadvantaged. Talking in the context of his work within the Scottish education system, Tommy MacKay argued that socio-economic disadvantage constituted the most significant dimension in inequalities in the provision of education. The most vulnerable members of society (as identified through gender, 'race' and social class) are over-represented in lower socio-economic groups.

He pointed towards a complex relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational experiences, illustrating this with examples from his own work (such as the 'levelling' power of social class with regards to access issues for pupils with disabilities). He emphasised the subtlety of discrimination which may occur, often under the guise of 'helping' the disadvantaged.

In addition to highlighting certain issues around statutory arrangements regarding Special Educational Needs (SEN), the abuse of power in public services was also addressed. Drawing on his own research with 50 educational psychologists in the UK, he



Tommy MacKay

argued that the abuse of power within educational services is a widespread experience.

MacKay recommended that additional provisions should be built into the equal opportunities policies for all public services to

ensure that provision is equitable. These recommendations were based on the naming and formalizing of this area of discrimination, which he has applied in his own public service as a 'principle of fairness'.

MacKay also drew attention to current inequalities in the structure of public spending, with particular regard to education. He suggested that currently, insufficient money is being directed to where needs are greatest, and this must be redressed if the needs of the most disadvantaged in society are to be met. However, he said that this will require not just financial backing, but 'vision'.

The address concluded with a call for strong commitment and concerted action from psychologists to confront discrimination. This declaration encapsulated the passion and commitment of Tommy MacKay's own involvement in challenging inequalities of opportunity.

Louise Archer reports on the lecture given by the winner of the Award for Challenging Inequality of Opportunity, 1997-8.

Issues of exclusion

Louise Archer reports on the Division of Educational and Child Psychology symposium, convened and chaired by Liz Malcolm.

THE exclusion of pupils from schools is an issue which attracts considerable concern across public, professional and academic spheres.

This symposium, organized by the DECP, attempted to discuss various important trends — and imbalances — in the exclusion of

pupils. In particular, the session highlighted the problems surrounding current practices of exclusion, with reference to the disproportionately high rates of exclusion among male, black and SEN (Special Educational Needs) young people.

The symposium opened with



Chris Watkins' (Institute of Education) paper on 'Trends in exclusion', in which he explained differences in the use of exclusion between schools in terms of 'cultures of exclusion'. In particular, he identified secondary schools as typified by 'cultures of escalation', rather than 'cultures of engagement', in their approach to exclusion.

National testing and school performance tables were suggested as contributing to greater teacher overload and were linked to the over-representation of SEN pupils in exclusion rates (since in terms of performance tables, such pupils appear as a 'liability').

The role of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which are currently the most used provision for pupils who have been permanently excluded from secondary schools, were also implicated in the problematization of pupils who experience difficulties. The wide range of pupils within these units was questioned (for example, 'aggressors' and 'victims' are brought together, along with anorexics and young mothers) and the various cultures and styles of management were considered. In particular, the 'one-way traffic' through PRUs was highlighted as problematic, resulting from a lack of criteria to facilitate the return of pupils to mainstream schooling.

In the second paper, Karl Brooks and Dennis Grant (Enfield Educational Psychology Service) drew attention to the disproportionately high rates of exclusion among black pupils. They argued that this imbalance may be due to the dominance of the 'compensatory perspective' underlying British multiculturalist approaches to schooling. Within this perspec-

tive, black pupils have been considered 'problematic', requiring strategies to compensate for their educational and social deficits. This positioning of black pupils as 'Others' (as judged against a white norm) was identified as inevitably leading to higher rates of exclusion.

They suggested that currently little provision is made for pupils who are excluded, since emphasis is placed on removing young people from schools, rather than focusing efforts on keeping them there. They put forward a number of recommendations for good practice, designed to help create climates in schools which prevent perceptions of exclusion as being the only option. For this, they proposed strategies involving work with individuals and groups and with families and schools. Intervention at local education authority (LEA) level and the role of educational psychologists, at the level of policy, were also suggested.

The third paper, from Andy Miller (University of Nottingham), considered 'Pupil behaviour and teacher culture'. Specifically, he pointed towards the existence of social processes which suppress the sharing of successful intervention strategies for 'problem pupils' among teachers and professionals. The implication is that greater awareness and adoption of such techniques may reduce current reliance upon exclusion.

Miller drew on his own research with 24 teachers from primary schools across eight LEAs, in which teachers were asked about instances when they had worked successfully with 'difficult' pupils (those who had been identified as having behaviour problems). Rather than expanding upon the content of these strategies (for which we were referred to his book, of the same title as his paper), he emphasised the cultures in schools which work to suppress and hide these 'success stories'. For example, he suggested that there is a general lack of interest in the sharing and discussing of strategies on the part of both the teacher who has been working with a specific pupil, and other staff at school.

He explained this both in terms of the relative isolation of teachers, the 'possessive' nature of

teaching, and the wish not to offend other staff by suggesting alternative teaching methods.

The final paper was delivered by Pam Maras (University of Greenwich), in which she addressed 'Sex, gender and exclusion from school'. The over-representation of males in rates of exclusion, in special schools and in PRUs, was discussed in terms of professionals' different perceptions of emotional and behavioural problems in male and female pupils.

Drawing on data from a range of professional groups (e.g. primary and secondary school teachers, governors and educational psychologists), she argued that, generally, behavioural issues are seen as more problematic than emotional problems, and that behavioural problems are perceived as more problematic for boys than for girls. Maras said that this focus upon behaviour was linked to concerns over resources, and compared this with teachers' perceptions that emo-



tional difficulties are located as a 'home issue'.

However, a question was raised concerning the lack of attention paid to other 'cross-cutting' categories within gender (such as 'race', SES and so on). This final point echoed my own concerns throughout the symposium that within educational policy and research, 'race' is often treated as a 'male issue' and 'gender' as a 'white issue'.

Nevertheless, the symposium raised many pertinent questions regarding schools' current reliance upon exclusion, arguing that this does not benefit the pupils involved, and highlighting how the process of exclusion is not uniform, with some groups experiencing particularly high rates. Most importantly though, the speakers within the symposium offered teachers and professionals some useful alternative strategies with which to work.

Dimensions of child abuse

THIS important topic area was covered in an interesting and informative symposium by researchers from University College Cork and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The papers were clearly presented and concise, and it was encouraging to note that the presenters had used interesting and sometimes innovative methods of obtaining information on a sensitive area of research.

Kevin Lalor (Dublin Institute of Technology) started off the symposium with an interesting paper on the Dublin Child Sexual Abuse Survey. This survey asked a sample of third level students about their sexual abuse experiences in childhood and the perceived effects. Response rates were high. Some 30 per cent of female respondents reported unwanted sexual experiences, indecent exposure being the most frequent. The figure falls considerably for contact and penetrative forms of abuse. Arising from these findings, Lalor recommended empowerment of children through education strategies at both primary and secondary level.

Next, Deborah Browne (University College Cork) highlighted the impact of abuse on foster children. She started by reporting that the long-term effects of abuse on foster children have not been given adequate attention by psychologists. Her research has attempted to rectify this by looking at the direct link between a history of abuse and negative placement outcome. She gathered detailed information from social workers and foster parents indicating whether the placement had been successful.

Foster teenagers themselves also completed Frydenberg and Lewis's Adolescent Coping Scales. Browne found that physically and/or sexually abused foster children are more likely to experience problems in placements, which indicate that problems for abused children seem to be intensified by their particular history. Additionally, young people who had been abused were significantly more likely to use 'self-blame' and 'keep to self' coping strategies than teenagers who had not been abused, and were less likely to turn to friends for support than the other young people. She warned of the impli-

cations of not addressing these very real concerns.

Andrew Silke (University College Cork) then turned our attention to the abuse of children and adolescents in Northern Ireland. As this is an area that is not widely documented the findings of his research were at times disquieting, though very enlightening. He began by reporting that in Northern Ireland, both republican and loyalist groups intentionally target juveniles in punishment attacks. As well as being victims of such attacks they also frequently witness attacks being carried out on others.

In his research, Silke has created a database of attacks since 1994 which showed that in all, 108 punishment attacks were directed against juveniles. He found that injuries to children were relatively mild but that they frequently witnessed more severe attacks on older victims. Teenage victims experienced the worst physical injuries in the overall sample, and the psychological effects of the beatings were also severe — although he admits that clinical confirmation is rare as victims are reluctant to seek professional medical help.

Rachel O'Connell from University College Cork gave the last paper in the symposium. It focused on exploring how paedophiles organize communication networks through the use of technologies such as the internet. She claims that an analysis of the content of these communications, in particular communication via newsgroups, yields an insight into the structure of paedophile communication networks. The activities



that paedophiles engage in revolve around the trading of child erotica and pornographic pictures of children. She went on to argue that an analysis of paedophile text-based and picture-based child erotica and pornography gives an insight into the fantasies, rationalizations and justifications for their predilection.

Overall, this was a very informative and thought-provoking symposium.

The research covered several different dimensions and areas of child abuse, including some which are not always well known (certainly to the reviewer who is not an expert in the field). Although the results of their studies were sometimes disturbing they were never presented in a sensational format and were always dealt with sensitively and professionally. I'm sure the papers gave much fuel for discussion even after the short time left for questions.

*A
symposium
report by
Heather
Buchanan.*

Advances in cognitive therapy of anxiety

FOR 20 years research and practice in the cognitive therapy of anxiety disorders has been dominated by Beck's schema model. The work of Adrian Wells and his colleagues is beginning to challenge and expand upon the assumptions of this approach, providing more specific models of the anxiety disorders, which consider a wider range of behaviours and broader view of cognition.

In this informative and enter-

taining lecture the speaker outlined contemporary models of cognitive therapy for the anxiety disorders, illustrating his ideas with evidence from both social phobia and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).

In the case of social phobia, where individuals fear they will behave in a way which is humiliating or embarrassing, the challenge for psychologists is to explain why these maladaptive beliefs are

*Kate
Cavanagh
reports on
Adrian
Wells's
Current
Trends
Lecture.*

maintained irrespective of intensive exposure to feared situations. Wells focused on two key areas of research, investigating the role of 'safety behaviours' and self-focused attention in the maintenance of social phobias.

Traditional anxiety management approaches may encourage the use of social skills techniques including safety behaviours — for example, hiding perspiration by wearing extra layers of clothes. In contrast, Wells argues that such behaviours may promote self-consciousness and failures in accurately processing social information. Instructions to reduce safety behaviours lead to a significant reduction in anxiety and negative beliefs in comparison to mere exposure therapy, supporting the idea that safety behaviours inform and promote negative self-evaluation.

When recalling an anxious social scene phobics tend to report viewing the scene looking in upon themselves, whereas control participants tend to view the scene from the inside looking out. Wells argued that social phobics' self-focused attention may inhibit the processing of disconfirmatory information about the dangers of social situations. Although social phobics evaluate their own behaviour in social situations negatively, there is little evidence that observers do. Therefore shifting the phobics' attention to focus on others might promote belief change and reduce anxiety in social situations.

In the case of GAD, one of the conditions least responsive to cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), contemporary models focus upon the distress caused by chronic worrying. Wells' model suggests that it is not the content of worry

per se, but negative beliefs about worrying and worry about worry itself which may underlie the distress of GAD. Wells argued that in therapy for GAD it is important to tackle this meta-worry, and more broadly, that our understanding of vulnerability to the anxiety disorders may be informed by such meta-cognitive factors.

In the case of both disorders Wells emphasised the importance of developing individual case formulations in therapy, and the need to forge links between schema theories and information processing architectures.

Preliminary evidence has suggested that when therapy (for both social phobia and GAD) is based on the models highlighted in this lecture, the number of treatment sessions needed may be impressively reduced in comparison to more traditional CBT techniques.

I just want your attention

Tim Earl
comments
on invited
lectures by
Steven
Tipper and
Anne
Treisman

TWO invited speakers formed a key focus for one of the three main themes of the conference — that of attention. Anne Treisman (Princeton University, USA) gave a talk entitled 'Feature binding, attention and object perception' and Steven Tipper (University of Wales, Bangor) spoke about 'Frames of reference in attention'. Treisman and Tipper are two outstanding researchers with reputations for the quality and breadth of their research over a number of years. Both are concerned with the functioning of attention, and particularly how it serves other aspects of visual processing. They are also both interested in the role of individual features in attention and perception.

Anne Treisman's focus is very much on the process of attention. How does it serve to achieve the perception of objects? Her Feature Integration Theory (FIT) is one of the major theories of object per-

ception, suggesting a mechanism for combining individual features into whole objects, and maintaining them as such — the long-standing 'binding problem'. She gave an outline of FIT, and some of the major points of her research to date. This includes an emphasis on the representation of features, and their combination into whole objects — the role of attention. She also acknowledged the contributions of her collaborators, including graduate students who have gone on to make their own careers, and who would no doubt acknowledge their debt to her in turn.

In contrast to Treisman's focus on the way attention works, Tipper's interest is in the why of attention, and particularly selective attention. Why has it evolved the way it has, and what problem has driven this evolution? His main research tool is the negative priming effect (the increased reaction time to respond to a recently ignored stimulus). From this, he has developed his theory of inhibitory mechanisms in selective attention, to complement excitatory processing applied to desired information. Excitatory processing enhances and maintains representations of objects of interest in a visual scene, whereas others passively decay away. A mechanism which actively inhibits unwanted representations will increase the rate and level of this differentiation. These inhibitory mechanisms

seem flexible enough to operate at the level of individual features, and to facilitate action. These effects have led him to conclude that the main reason for the existence of selective attention is to link perception to action.

Both speakers demonstrated their expertise in designing experiments to examine exact points of theory, and their willingness to consider and integrate evidence from other research paradigms into their theory development. As well as her own behavioural data, Treisman draws on neurological and physiological evidence for the modularity of attention, and selective impairment due to trauma. Tipper also draws on a wide range of converging evidence, including inhibition of return, connectionist modelling, and visual neglect.

They had to pitch their addresses at a level which would satisfy both the general conference audience, and the more specialist one attracted by this year's theme of attention — who would not only be knowledgeable in the field, but probably familiar with much of their work. Both speakers coped admirably with this dilemma, firstly by placing their topics within a general psychological framework, and giving a historical account to keep the non-specialist interested. Secondly, by descriptions of the theoretical problems and development, and by including some of their most recent work to show the current state of their research.

Louise Archer is at the University of Greenwich.

Heather Buchanan is at the University of Derby.

Kate Cavanagh is at the University of Sussex.

Tim Earl is at Plymouth University

Correction to last month's reports:

From the report of the symposium on cognitive development in children with Down's Syndrome (p.276) John MacDonald and Joanna Nye are at the University of Portsmouth and not the colleges listed. We apologize for this error.