Culture Science and the Concept of Child

Not too long ago I told a friend that I was thinking about writing an article charging that all educational research is a lie. This article would not fault the academic obsession with 'knowledge production' though that is dreadful enough. Nor would it harp on the limitations of the methods of quantitative research, though they are severe enough. No, the thrust of this article would be that educational research is largely unguided by anything other than implicit ideas of a child development or of what it means to be human. Much research seems to be a combination of naïve realism and unthinking behaviorism. Certainly if you tried to reconstruct a human being from the features described in the literature of educational research, your construction would be a peculiar-looking creature.

The field of developmental psychology attends, in part, to such concepts as 'child'. It turns out that the concept of a child, which is influenced by the prevailing ideology of development, is now in flux and has been for some time.(Article by Kathryn Young of Yale University in the February 1990 issue of Child Development.

Young notes that the women's magazines began to publish articles about child care near the end of the 19th century and that such publications 'evolved into a sustained alliance between experts and parents in which pediatricians, psychologists, educators, and child developmentalists have assumed the role of counsel of parents'. Two publications, parents magazine and infant care manual have long histories of communicating information from professionals to parents. Young set out to see what these publications were telling the parents between 1955 and 1984.

She analyzed the articles in both publications for topical content(how often certain topics appeared) and thematic content (what was said about certain themes, such as breast-feeding or the role of the mother in development). The 443 articles on infants that were published between 1955 and 1984 fell about evenly into two categories: information from research and theory and information about practical concerns and infant care.

Young also looked at the frequency data on the percentage of articles appearing in each of the three decades covered 1955-64, 1965-74, 1975-84. Different topics showed different patterns. Articles on the mother child relationship accounted for about 10% or the articles in the first two decades, then rose to 20% in the next decade. Articles on feeding, on the other hand, accounted for 25% of all articles between 1955 and 1964 then fell to about 15% for the next two decades.

Articles about working mothers were virtually nonexistent in the first two decades, then rose to about 8% of the articles in the third. Similarly, pieces about infant cognition rose from about 7% in the first two decades to about 15% in the third. When one looks at what the articles actually said, other trends emerge. Although mother child interaction continued to be important throughout the three decades, the overarching power and centrality of the maternal role declined. Similarly, articles in the first two decades emphasized the role of the mother as a full time care taker. An article that appeared in Parents Magazine In 1960 said that 'a baby needs his mother as vitally as he needs food and air'. Only in the eighties did the Parent Magazine begin to reassure mothers that out of home care for infants is okay and to provide advice about child-care centers. So marked has this trend become that some articles have appeared that reassure mothers that it is okay to stay at home with the children.

Although the coverage of fathers by Parents Magazine did not change much in terms of frequency, the emphasis shifted from the father as someone the mothers should include but not expect a lot out of to the view that the father has an integral and unique role to play.

The topic of feeding cycled with the times, emphasizing breast-feeding in the Fifties, advising either method in the Sixties and the Seventies, and shifting back to breast feeding in the Eighties. This shift occurred in spite of what Young calls 'attempts to of both publications to present a balanced perspective' and in spite of the lack of solid research evidence about the benefits of breast feeding.

Shifting away from themes about child rearing practice, Parents Magazine maintained a notion of infants as active and thinking, presenting Piaget's concepts when they became popular in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Infant care, on the other hand, was slower in shifting from the view of infants as active learners.

Discussions about communication and temperament also followed the research findings of the periods. Young writes: Two trends are noted in what experts tell parents. The first trend is research-driven, as experts have used psychological research of the last 30 years as the basis for the information and advice they present to parents. Equally powerful is a second trend that is certain areas expert advice is more based on the broader social context and changing demographics.
Clearly our conceptions of children change. The cry, ‘Women and children first,’ is of recent origin even for sinking ships. Our conception is clearly not that of the English in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, when children worked in factories for 14 hours a day seven days a week. It has even been argued that, until seventeenth century, the concept of childhood did not exist at all.
Children were not given any special clothes, toys, or attention. They were generally ignored until they were about 7 years old. Then, when it looked as if they might actually live to adulthood, they were treated as adults. As recently as 1979, another Yale psychologist, William Kessen referred to both children and child psychology as ‘cultural inventions’.
Although it may be disconcerting to people trained to perceive science as the objective pursuit of the truth, all socially meaningful constructs, such as the concept of a child, will always be affected by culture, and, yes, by a degree of expediency. I think, though, that those of us in education would do better if our concept were made more explicit and comprehensive than they currently are. (From Young’s article, I don’t think that 30 years of Parents Magazine painted a comprehensive picture either.)

Tips for readers of Research
Some tips bear repeating. So in the spirit that there are ‘lies, damned lies and statistics, ‘ I repeat some advice about looking at statistics in ways other than the ways they are presented to you by various authors and reports.
For example, a recent survey concluded that the two most dangerous cars in America were two Chevrolet creations, The Corvette and the Camaro. This conclusion was drawn from a statistic showing a number of deaths per accident. Well, to begin with, one can ask whether this is the best measure of ‘Dangerousness.’ How about accidents per thousand miles driven? Or the number of recalls by the manufacturer? Clearly, there are other statistics that could be used.
More important, though does it strike you as reasonable that these full sized cars would be inherently more dangerous than the tiny Subary Justy, Ford Festiva, or Toyota Tercel? Me either. The Corvette, of course is a pure power machine, and one might wish to inquire about the average speed of those Corvettes at the time of all those accidents. A Camaro, on the other hand is a lot like acne; it affects males more than females, and most people grow out of it when they reach adulthood. Since it is sadly the case that young males have more accidents than other people, one might want to know the sex and the average age of the drivers in Camaro accidents.
When identifying trends in reporting about infant development, the subject discussed above, the choice of statistical measures may affect our perception of importance. Kathryn Young used percentage of articles appearing in publications over a 30-year period. Seems a reasonable choice. But I note that most of the topical magazines that I subscribe to have grown thicker in recent years. The use of a percentage lets us see the importance of certain topics relative to other topics. The role of fathers, for example may have gotten significantly more important in terms of the number of articles published, but this would be obscured if numbers were rising in other categories as well.
On the other hand, the length of the articles in many publications has diminished as we have become a more factoid-oriented society with an apparently declining attention span for print. As a result, we could be having more articles that say a lot less. Without analyses in addition to the one Young offered, reasonable though it was, we simply cannot tell.

1. What do you think is the hypothesis behind Young’s research?

2. After reading this article, do you think that studying trends is a valid method for identifying changes in development across the life span?