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Education

Culture & the National Curriculum

Education, Culture and the National Curriculum

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PREFACE

One of the problems of curriculum studies is that it is subject to frequent change. The school curriculum in any society has to adjust to other kinds of social change as well as to disciplines which impinge on the intellectual study of curriculum planning. This book is a reflection of those adjustments: it is intended to replace *Curriculum Studies and Educational Planning* (1983) which was itself written as an acknowledgment that *Social Change, Educational Theory and Curriculum Planning* (1973) was out of date in many respects by the early 1980s.

I have preserved some sections of *Curriculum Studies and Educational Planning* but rather than simply attempting to up-date the book in the light of the events of the last five years, I thought it preferable to rethink several theoretical issues as well as to discuss the relevant education and political events which had taken place since 1983. The Education Act 1988 has correctly been described as the most significant legislation for education since 1944, and much will be written about the Act in its own right. However, the national curriculum as formulated in the Act needs to be seen in the context of theories of education and theories of social change.

Like *Curriculum Studies and Educational Planning*, this book will also employ a process of cultural analysis as a basis for curriculum planning. Thus, curriculum is defined as a selection from the culture of a society. Such a definition is uncontroversial (what else could a curriculum be?) – but controversy may begin when details of this selection from the culture emerge. Before that point can be reached, the culture has to be analysed, classified and 'matched' against existing curricula. At this stage inadequacies and contradictions can be perceived, and improvements suggested. However, the process of curriculum planning or replanning is not an automatic matching exercise: values are always involved. Whilst it may not be possible to reconcile differences in educational views within a society, it is important at least to attempt to clarify the issues and values prior to implementing a plan.

Denis Lawton 1988

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1 Curriculum Studies and Curriculum Planning

Curriculum Studies is still a relatively new subject in the UK and to describe oneself as a Professor of Curriculum Studies may provoke raised eyebrows or demands for explanation. The curriculum is often taken for granted rather than studied, and discussions of curriculum tend to centre on minor adjustments to traditional timetables rather than fundamental rethinking of aims and purposes. One of the criticisms of the Kenneth Baker proposals for a national curriculum, 1987–88, was that it only tinkered with existing subjects when what was required was a more fundamental re-examination of what young people in the 1980s need by way of knowledge, skills and experience.

Curriculum studies in the UK began to be regarded as a serious area for intellectual enquiry in the 1960s, when curriculum development was already taking place pragmatically in the form of Nuffield Science and Mathematics projects. These curriculum projects provoked questions and stimulated the study of curriculum in a number of ways and at a number of different levels. In the process of changing the existing science curriculum, for example, those advocating change were forced to answer such questions as

'Why teach science?'
'Should all children learn science?'
'What kind of science?'
'What is science?'
'What is school science?' and so on.

In some respects curriculum studies involved much of what already existed as general educational theory, but with more direct reference to teaching and learning in classrooms. The subject as a kind of academic discipline was further stimulated by the creation of the Schools Council in 1964 which not only provided funding for many more curriculum projects, but also encouraged, indirectly, some questions about the traditional curriculum and its adequacy.

In the USA curriculum studies had started earlier, both as an intellectual discipline and as a practical activity designed to improve the quality of learning. There is a tradition stretching from at least as far back as Bobbitt (1918), who wanted to reduce curriculum planning to specifying a few thousand highly specific tasks, to Tyler (1949), whose rationale laid the basis for much later discussion (see Chapter 2). Unfortunately, Tyler's rationale was frequently misunderstood and transformed into a very rigid behaviouristic model based on specific behavioural objectives. The misapplication of Tyler has occasionally floated across the

Atlantic, but the cultural resistance to that and other kinds of planning is very strong.

Curriculum planning is not an activity which came easily to the English educators. Planning involves putting into operation a theory of some kind, but the English tend to be practical, common-sense individuals who view theories and ideas with great caution. The weakness of this common-sense, amateur approach is, however, that it leaves teachers vulnerable to attack from outside the profession: if teachers cannot convincingly explain why they have adopted new mathematics or a modular curriculum then parents and others may feel entitled to criticise them. This attack may take the form of raising questions about 'standards' because that is usually the easiest way of denouncing innovation. In future years it will be essential for teachers to be able to justify their curricular decisions and classroom practices; if they attempt to do this in a completely non-theoretical way, they are likely to find themselves in difficulties.

The history of the Schools Council provides an excellent illustration of the British dislike of theory. The Schools Council will probably be remembered for funding a large number of interesting projects based on traditional subjects or attempting to develop aspects of an interdisciplinary curriculum; the Council never succeeded in outlining a systematic approach to the whole curriculum. Two attempts were made to discuss the whole curriculum but without real success. The first was in 1975 when after many discussions and several attempts to produce an agreed document, a very bland Working Paper eventually appeared *(The Whole Curriculum 13–16)*. This failure was partly the result of a policy which had developed among the teacher unions of resisting anything which could be seen as a centrally planned uniform curriculum. For the National Union of Teachers (NUT), National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and others, planning the curriculum was the responsibility of individual schools and teachers; Schools Council projects should offer packages of materials from which teachers could choose in order to build up their own curriculum.

The second attempt to produce a plan for the whole curriculum was made towards the end of the existence of the Schools Council. By then (1980–81) it was clear that one of the criticisms of the Council was that it lacked a coherent view of the curriculum as a whole, and a Working Party was somewhat reluctantly set up. It was a classic case of too little, too late: instead of commissioning a major study, the Schools Council Working Party, after a few meetings, produced *The Practical Curriculum* (1981). The document lacked any adequate theoretical underpinning and had very little impact on schools or projects.

One explanation for these failures has already been given – the hostility of teacher unions – but a more fundamental reason was the disinclination of teachers to engage in any discussion of the curriculum in theoretical terms. Good teachers regarded themselves as practical people who had no need of curriculum theory – the title of the Schools Council document, *The Practical Curriculum* was meant to appeal to classroom practitioners rather than to educational theorists.

Such rejection of theory was a costly mistake but, on the other hand, teachers in

England were right to reject some kinds of curriculum theory. They were right to be suspicious of those approaches to curriculum planning which begin with theory, and then proceed, step by step, to put some kind of *system* into practice. Teachers know intuitively that this is not what happens in the real world. Today it may be sensible to base a plan for building a new bridge on theoretical principles derived from mathematics and physics, but we should also remember that bridges were built long before engineers and physicists outlined their theories. In other words, in practical activities such as engineering, education and medicine, practice tends to precede theory; but this does not mean that theory is unnecessary – at a later stage theory refines practice and it eventually becomes difficult to improve practice without theoretical analysis.

When a politician or an employer criticises a school curriculum because it allegedly does not turn out young people ready for the world of work, there is a theory behind that apparently common-sense view: namely that one of the purposes of education is to prepare the young for working life. Few would suggest that this is the only purpose of education, so in order to discuss the subject sensibly, it becomes necessary to identify the other purposes of education in an advanced industrial society, and even to begin to make judgements about their relative importance. This is the beginning of the process of cultural analysis which will be employed in this book. (See Chapter 3).

Unfortunately, arguments about education or the curriculum are rarely conducted in a completely rational, analytical way: assertions of values or priorities provoke counter-assertions without reference to any means of judging what might be regarded as more appropriate or even superior. Every statement that a teacher makes in a classroom is value-laden, connected with ideas about the purpose of education, probably connected with the more general values and beliefs, and maybe with the purpose of life. So it is for educational planners and curriculum developers, whether they realise it or not. An assumption of this book is that it is important for teachers and planners to be aware of their values and to be able to make them explicit.

Some curriculum developers in the 1950s who were concerned with revising science curricula, claimed to be 'value-free'. However, they soon had to face questions about the purpose of school science: was the aim to provide enough scientists for industry? Or was the purpose of school science to equip all young people with an understanding of a very significant aspect of their social and physical environment? It is impossible to answer those kinds of questions without engaging in discussions of values.

Teachers and educational administrators, as well as politicians, operate with some kind of 'social theory' in the sense of sets of assumptions, values and ideas about a good society. These views may lack coherence, and some assumptions may contradict others. One purpose of curriculum studies is to clarify such issues and questions, to relate isolated points of view to more general ideologies, and to make clear what the theoretical and practical choices are. Curriculum studies is, therefore, concerned with theories rather than with a theory. In this sense curriculum studies may have some similarity to studying politics. It would be

wrong for a university course in political science to conclude by telling the students how to vote at the next election. It would be equally inappropriate for a book on curriculum studies to specify exactly what a curriculum should include; but in both cases the choices should be clearer and the basis of decision making more rational as a result of a course of study undertaken.

In pluralistic societies like ours, individuals agree about many important values and beliefs, but disagree about others. For some purposes of analysis, it may be useful to classify individuals according to their belief systems. In politics we use terms like 'conservative', 'liberal', 'social democrat'; in education it has been suggested that there are at least three basic educational ideologies (Skilbeck, 1976) each of which generates a different type of curriculum theory:

1 Classical humanism
2 Progressivism
3 Reconstructionism

These ideologies are 'ideal types' in the sense that they may not exist in a pure form – individual teachers could easily find themselves in at least two of the categories – but some aspects of one ideology may be incompatible with beliefs from one of the others.

Classical humanism

Classical humanism as an educational ideology can be traced back to Greece in the 4th century BC when Plato developed the idea of cultural heritage, whose custodians were a class of 'guardians'. The ideology survived the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and was the basis of Matthew Arnold's (1869) view of education. T.S. Eliot (1948) continued the tradition. An essential feature of classical humanism is that it associates traditional culture and values with a small 'elite'. The elite, referred to by Plato as 'men of gold', were to receive an education quite different from the other two groups – 'men of silver' and 'men of bronze'.

The classical humanist curriculum concentrates on cultural heritage; those kinds of knowledge worked out over centuries to give the best in terms of literature, music, and history. For some, science is a recent but important addition. In the UK the development of the classical humanist curriculum can be traced through the medieval trivium and quadrivium to the idea of the renaissance man, to the nineteenth-century public school and Christian gentlemen educated at Oxford or Cambridge.

There are those who continue to advocate classical humanism as the model for real education today but, in most democratic societies, education is now regarded as a 'good end' in its own right which ought to be available to all rather than being the privilege of a small elite. It is also an incomplete view of education since it concerns itself with only one kind of intellectual experience, whereas twentieth-

century society makes many more demands on future citizens. The kind of classical humanist subject-matter which served admirably as 'a badge of rank' for nineteenth-century gentlemen cannot easily be transformed into the kind of educational programme suitable for the majority in the 1990s. Nevertheless, anyone who cares to examine the educational arguments of the 1970s, for example, in the *Black Papers* (Cox and Dyson, 1969) will find clear examples of classical humanism.

PROGRESSIVISM

This ideology also has a long history: its most famous text is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). Whereas classical humanism is knowledge-centred, progressivism is openly child-centred, representing a romantic rejection of traditional values and practices. The transmission of cultural heritage is abandoned in favour of the goal of the child discovering for himself and following his own impulses. Childhood becomes important in its own right and is no longer regarded as preparation for adulthood; freedom is more important than social order.

Progressivism was made into a specific educational programme by other writers such as Pestalozzi and Froebel. One much publicised twentieth-century progressivist was A.S. Neill. Elements of the ideology were also apparent in the Plowden Report (1963) *Children and Their Primary Schools.* Many progressivists would reject the idea of a planned curriculum altogether; if there were a curriculum it would be based on experiences and topics chosen by the pupils themselves, and 'discovery' would be the dominant form of pedagogy. Knowledge of facts would be of little importance, although acquisition of concepts and generalisations might be an aim. Children's own writing and painting would be seen as of greater value than appreciating the achievements of others. In its most extreme form romantic individualism would reject traditional knowledge and values completely, in favour of the young discovering their own way of life; others, including Rousseau, seemed to want to manipulate the young into 'discovering' desirable solutions.

The main objection to progressivism is that it is based on an over-optimistic view of human nature. A. S. Neill and others have assumed that human beings are naturally good but become corrupted by an evil society. The evidence is against this ideology: children possess an innate selfishness which is only made tolerable by the influence of adults insisting on social conventions; a child only becomes truly human by developing socially as well as individually. Children and societies are complex mixtures of good and evil, and education consists ideally of encouraging the good and eliminating the evil. However, child-centred ideology was to some extent a healthy reaction against the inhuman treatment of children witnessed by Rousseau in the eighteenth century and indeed by A. S. Neill in the twentieth century. Moreover, the developmental approach advocated by Rousseau

has been refined by Piaget and others into a scientific approach to children's learning. Not all of progressivism can be rejected as romantic child-centred sentimentality; but as a complete view of education and curriculum it is deeply flawed.

Reconstructionism

If classical humanism is knowledge-centred, and progressivism is child-centred, reconstructionism might be described as society-centred. However, this would be an over-simplification since an important part of reconstructionism is to see individuals and society as harmoniously integrated rather than in opposition. It might be more helpful to regard the three ideologies in Hegelian terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis: classical humanism being the original traditional 'thesis', progressivism providing a radical reaction against classical humanism, with reconstructionism emerging as a synthesis of both, preserving the best but developing a new ideology differing from the two that preceded it.

Social reconstructionists see education as a way of improving society, and at the same time developing individual members of society. In the USA reconstructionism is often associated with John Dewey (although Tanner and Tanner (1980) make a distinction between Dewey's 'experimentalism' and 'social reconstructionism' which was a more radical ideology). Dewey saw the experimental methods of science as an appropriate approach to social questions. For Dewey, democracy was not simply a form of government but a way of life which provided maximum opportunities for individual growth. Education for all was a desirable aspect of a democratic society as well as a means of achieving a better democracy. Education provided opportunities for individual growth, thus ensuring an improving quality of life for individuals as well as improving the quality of society itself.

The reconstructionist curriculum lays stress upon social values: experiences appropriate for developing citizenship and social cooperation. Knowledge is by no means ignored, but knowledge for its own sake is questionable. Knowledge is justified in terms of social needs, not in terms of custom, nor cultural heritage *per se*. Subjects will not be taken for granted, and various patterns of 'integrated studies' may tend to assume more importance than subject compartments. Science and mathematics will be taught to all pupils, not only because they are useful for vocational preparation, but because they are important for an understanding of the society and the physical environment.

The view taken in the following chapters is a democratic, non-utopian version of social reconstructionism. This is not to imply that there is no value in the other two ideologies but that, given a democratic society which values certain kinds of freedom, a version of social reconstructionism is the most appropriate planning model. Progressivism and classical humanism will be seen not to stand up to an

analysis of the needs of individuals growing up in an industrial society in the last part of the twentieth century. To use reconstructionism as a basis of curriculum planning is, however, only the first stage in deciding on a curriculum, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, and this commitment does not answer all the questions which will arise about curriculum content.

It is not, of course, the case that the three ideologies outlined above are the only ones possible. Skilbeck, for example, refers to a bureaucratic-technicist ideology which has some links with utilitarianism; but there is a good deal of agreement in the UK, USA and Australia on the definition of three basic educational ideologies, despite some confusing differences in terminology. Tanner and Tanner (1980), for example, postulate three basic 'philosophies', the conservative, the progressivist and the romantic, each of which can be sub-divided: some conservatives (Skilbeck's classical humanists) may advocate a 'great books of the past' approach to curriculum (the perennialists); other conservatives, of a somewhat less reactionary disposition, would base the curriculum on traditional forms of knowledge or subject disciplines (the essentialists). Tanner and Tanner's progressivists are not the same as Skilbeck's progressivists but are closer to his reconstructionists; but this group is sub-divided by Tanner and Tanner into experimentalism, the most notable exponent of which was Dewey, and social reconstructionists who would be more radical, advocating using education to question and even reject some aspects of current social values. Finally, Tanner and Tanner's romantics would include those referred to by Skilbeck as progressivists as well as a separate group of existentialists.

It is also important not to ignore the relation between educational ideologies and deep-rooted social and political beliefs as well as psychological attitudes. Classical humanists, for example, tend to be associated with political conservativism. Other writers have pointed out the existence of fundamental differences in beliefs about human nature which affect social and educational views. Many would agree with Hobbes (1588–1679) that human beings are essentially selfish; they would reject not only progressivist ideology but probably any child-centred practices in education.

On the other hand, the above educational ideologies cannot be simply equated with political ideologies concerned with the control of and access to educational opportunity. There will be some overlap but not total convergence. Later in this book I shall be discussing four ideological positions concerning the debate between those who would plan education and those who would leave education to market forces. In Chapter 6 I identify four positions on the ideological spectrum – the privatisers, the minimalists, the pluralists and the comprehensive planners. Those who favour planning will tend to support greater state provision and expenditure at all levels of education, whereas the advocates of the market want to minimise public expenditure and encourage parents and others to spend their own money on education and training if they see this as a benefit. There is a danger of this dispute in education developing into a false opposition between justice and freedom. The ideological differences are, however, much more complex, as Rawls (1972), Dworkin (1977) and Ackerman (1980) have shown. At times of economic

recession, however, it is easy for social justice in education to become a lower priority. This has happened in many part of the world, including the USA, Australia and New Zealand since the economic problems associated with oil prices began in the 1970s. There is a temptation in those societies to retreat to more elitist, less egalitarian policies with an emphasis on vocational training rather than education for the majority.

SUMMARY

Education cannot be value-free. Different value systems or ideologies will generate different curricula. In twentieth-century democratic societies attempts are being made to educate all young people instead of focusing on the elite minority favoured by classical humanism. Progressivism is likewise rejected, partly because its view of human nature is unrealistically optimistic, and partly because it fails to relate curriculum to society and the educational needs of individuals growing up in that society. Given a democratic society which nevertheless retains a number of undemocratic features, some kind of experimentalist or reconstructionist approach would seem to be necessary. Reconstructionism assumes that education should be used not simply for the benefit of individuals, but also to improve a society which is capable of development. A reconstructionist curriculum will be a common or a national curriculum, but not a uniform curriculum, the details of which will be open to debate and will change from time to time.

2 Education, Training and the Problem of Objectives

One of the problems of modern industrial society is that work tends to take on a very powerful, even dominant, significance for adults. Employers, parents and the young themselves often see childhood and adolescence largely in terms of preparation for work. This must be an incomplete view of education and maturation, since work is only one of many features of the adult world. A real danger is that preparation for work is seen as *the* purpose of education rather than one of several purposes; a related danger is that the distinction between education and training becomes blurred, or that training is confused with education completely.

In recent years there has been a good deal of discussion about education and training, sometimes contrasting the two words, sometimes treating them as synonymous. It has even been suggested that schools are failing because they are not providing the kind of trained manpower needed by industry and commerce. This is an over-simplified argument which becomes even more misleading when interpreted as an excuse for more training but less education.

In any discussion of curriculum planning it is important to preserve the distinction between the two concepts, and to emphasise that some worthwhile activities and experiences in schools may be a mixture of both. It is also important to avoid the simplistic assertion that education is good and training is inferior. The difficulty is compounded, in English, by the verb 'teach' being associated with education, whilst the verb 'instruct' is used in the context of training.

Training is the appropriate word when we are concerned with a specific skill or set of skills where there is a clear criterion or set of criteria for right and wrong. The army employs weapon training instructors, not weapon education teachers. They have clear criteria about how to hold a rifle, how to aim, how to squeeze (not pull) the trigger, how to strip and clean a rifle and so on. There is no room for any kind of debate about methods or opinions – there is a right way and a wrong way. Successful performance can easily be measured – how many bulls were scored etc. Training is a closed system; progress takes place within a deficit model – errors and omissions are easily identified and put right. A one hundred per cent success rate is the required goal. Education, on the other hand, is open-ended. Objectives cannot be defined or pre-specified with complete precision; there are criteria to indicate good and bad procedures and practices, but there will not necessarily be one correct answer, nor one right way of performing. Good performance and achievement can be recognised, perhaps even measured, but with less precision and certainty. Indeed, one of the goals of education is to encourage tolerance of

uncertainty and ambiguity, where appropriate. If a student stated that the French Revolution started in 1815, he is certainly wrong (although there is a good deal of doubt about when it really did start); and if we move on to the causes of the French Revolution, there is even more room for debate. There is no right answer – partly because important events in history can rarely be related to one single 'cause'. Similarly, in English literature, who can say that Olivier's interpretation of Hamlet was more 'correct' than Gielgud's? But words like 'interpretation', 'taste', 'style' are much more difficult to cope with than rifle shots hitting a target.

Although education is necessarily concerned with 'high level' activities, training is still an important aspect of educational planning. Training is a vital part of many valuable school activities. It is true that you can train a dog but not educate it; but most travellers would prefer to go to America in an aeroplane with a well-trained pilot rather than a well-educated one. Some kinds of essential training are very complex and demanding. It has become fashionable to talk of teacher education rather than teacher training, but that should not obscure the fact that for some aspects of teacher preparation, the word training might be more appropriate. Teachers, unlike pilots, need to be well-educated as well as well-trained. Most involved in higher education would like to believe that the airline pilot would be a better human being if he were educated as well as trained. Training is, however, morally neutral whereas education implies improvement in quality: it is possible to train an individual to be an efficient torturer, but you could not make him better educated in that way.

For some educational processes training is a prerequisite; schools are necessarily concerned with training as part of the education process. For example, elementary reading and arithmetic involve training in basic skills; so does learning a modern language or playing the piano. One legitimate criticism of some schools is that they do not pay enough attention to skills and training – they take them for granted when they should be more aware of them as desirable objectives; but it is equally mistaken to think of all education simply as acquiring a list of skills.

Similarly, there is a view of education and curriculum planning (in my view completely misguided) which suggests that you can reduce all learning processes to a series of *behavioural* objectives, master them as a result of training, and measure progress in terms of performance outcomes. If this were true, education as well as training could be reduced to a simple mechanistic formula. That mechanistic approach can be traced back to Franklin Bobbitt (1918) in the USA. His method was 'activity analysis':

> Developed by Franklin Bobbitt and W. W. Charters, the method activity analysis came to be cloaked as the scientific way to build a curriculum. According to Bobbitt, life consists of the performance of specific activities; if education is preparation for life, then it must prepare for these specific activities; these activities, however numerous, are definite and particularised, and can be taught; therefore, these activities will be the objectives of the curriculum.
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> (Tanner and Tanner, 1980)