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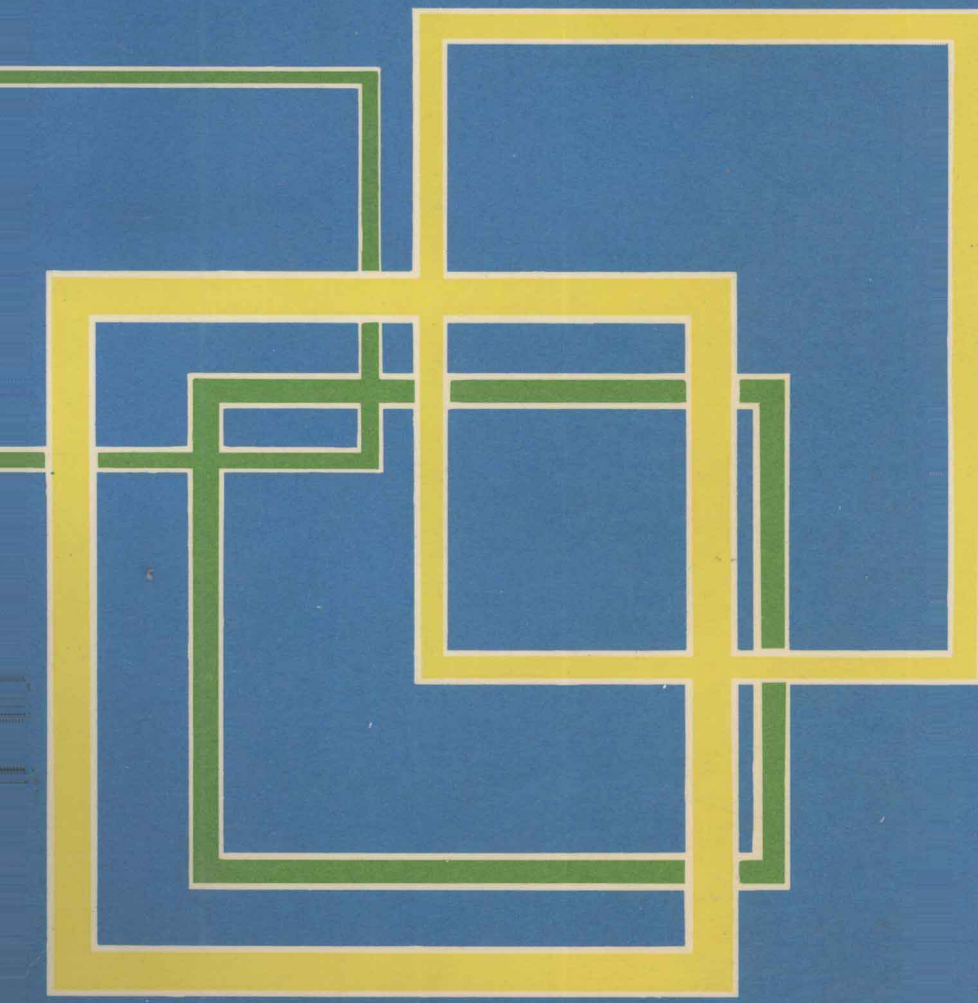
Maurice Holt



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McGRAW-HILL Book Company (UK) Limited

London · New York · St Louis · San Francisco · Auckland
Bogotá · Guatemala · Hamburg · Johannesburg · Lisbon
Madrid · Mexico · Montreal · New Delhi · Panama · Paris
San Juan · São Paulo · Singapore · Sydney · Tokyo · Toronto

Published by
McGRAW-HILL Book Company (UK) Limited
MAIDENHEAD · BERKSHIRE · ENGLAND

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Holt, Maurice John
Schools and curriculum change.
1. Comprehensive high schools – England –
Curricula
I. Title
373.2'5'0942 LB1629.5.G7 79–42799

ISBN 0–07–084114–4
ISBN 0–07–084113–6 Pbk

12345 W.J.M. 83210

PRINTED AND BOUND IN GREAT BRITAIN

Schools and curriculum change

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Preface

Interest in the school curriculum—and particularly that of secondary comprehensive schools—is no longer confined to project developers and theorists. Public concern about the shape and purpose of the curriculum has broadened the base of curriculum studies, and the need for schools to decide what they are in business to do means that teachers must think about the curriculum in terms that are both broad and searching.

Schools have, of course, been involved since the nineteen-sixties in new curriculum projects at national level, and there have been some local initiatives. But while there has been much curriculum development, there is little evidence of coherent curriculum planning. Since the mid-'seventies there has emerged a growing emphasis on the need to see the curriculum as a whole, and this concern has led to an interest in the management of curriculum change and in its evaluation. The ideas and assumptions which have led to much of the development since the early 'sixties have come in for critical scrutiny, and increasingly the focus for curriculum change is seen to be the school itself.

The rapid growth of the field of curriculum studies has tended to weaken the link between theory and practice. But schools need to develop a rationale of the curriculum, and theorists need to root their concepts in practical problems, and throw light on these problems. Theory must be seen as a part of practice, and if teachers are to respond to the challenges faced by schools, they must acquire an understanding of curriculum issues as part of their professional role. If the educational purpose of the comprehensive school is to be expressed in new curricula, teachers must become familiar with the implications of whole-curriculum planning and the place of deliberation and judgement in making curriculum decisions.

The title of this book reflects this emphasis. My aim has been to discuss curriculum issues from the point of view of the practising teacher and the innovating school. I hope the book will be of value not only to teachers involved in pre-service and in-service education, but also to administrators, parents and governors: to all, in short, who seek to understand how schools work and how the education they offer might be improved.

Maurice Holt

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1. The context of change

1.1 Change and education

Change is as much an aspect of education as education is an aspect of society. The secondary comprehensive school is an agency for educating all the nation's children, and so it must inevitably reflect, in its curriculum and organization, the patterns of social and economic change in the society it exists to serve.

Change, then, is not something that will go away. This book suggests that it is possible for schools not only to learn to live with it, but to develop the art of responding to it so as to make themselves better. It will examine how comprehensive schools, which first began to multiply in the 'sixties, have come to a fruitful stage in their growth, and look at the directions in which they seem likely to move. It will take stock of what we have learnt, and consider the styles of innovation and management that are likely to be of value in the future.

The grammar school influence

The story begins with a system of education which changed very little. For about a quarter of a century, the English grammar school lay secure in its assumptions and purposes. Until the postwar consequences of the 1944 Education Act raised doubts about its scope and effectiveness, there were few outside influences to disturb the calm of its procedures. Like all schools, it was a part of society; but it was a relatively stable society, and the grammar school represented a somewhat protected part of it. It catered for a small and narrowly defined segment of the population, and had good historical reasons for seeing its aims in terms of the requirements for university entry. So it could enjoy sweet, sequestered days when textbooks kept going from one year to the next, and most of the teachers did, too.

Yet the grammar school was not free to decide its own curriculum, as is technically the case with today's maintained schools. This was centrally determined, and last revised in the 1935 Regulations for Secondary Schools. The arrangement probably made for even greater stability, because few areas of content changed significantly. It was not until well into the 'fifties, for instance, that the nature of the mathematics course to school certificate or O-level standard came to be seen as anything less than divinely inspired. It was revolutionary enough to argue that the staple diet of Euclidean geometry or

quadratic equations should make way for new approaches to mathematics; even worse from the point of view of the grammar school supporter was the suggestion that along with the new content went new teaching methods.

It was the end of a comfortable but complacent existence. The grammar school had not been notably successful at its chosen task—of acting, in effect, as a preparatory school for higher education. As long ago as 1933 Lord Eustace Percy had declared that the grammar school was little more than 'a social factory for turning the sons of clerks and shopkeepers into clerks and shopkeepers' (quoted in Banks, 1955). More objective evidence was unearthed in the Crowther Report of 1959, which found that 'half the National Service recruits to the Army who were rated in the two highest ability groups had left school at 15'. The narrowness of the grammar school's objectives gave it a quiet life, by insulating it from the demands of mass education. But the objectives were interpreted in such uncompromising terms that they also narrowed its ability to engage even with its highly selective pupils, who formed roughly the upper 20 per cent by ability of the population.

But there was assuredly a demand for mass secondary education, and the needs of the rest of the school population were met, in the postwar years, by the secondary modern school. This extended the traditions of the old elementary school, with a new emphasis on a curriculum which would reflect its pupils' own interests. The notion that these schools should work out their own aims and programmes made a sharp contrast with the formal rituals by which the grammar schools measured themselves against the examinations of the university boards. The doctrine that the two types of school had 'parity of esteem' had a hollow ring which parents were not slow to detect. But in the end, the body-blow to this bipartite system was delivered by those secondary modern schools which challenged the grammar schools on their own ground, and with some success entered abler pupils for O-level subject examinations. This, coupled with the growing evidence of poor grammar school performance and of the depressing effect of the secondary modern school concept on those pupils banished to them, meant that by the end of the 'fifties, the notion of a secondary school which would cater for the talents and aspirations of all pupils, regardless of any prior test of ability, had much to commend it.

Background to the comprehensive school

Before we look at the emergent comprehensive school, three points should be noted.

First, just as the grammar school had taken shelter from social changes, for most of its existence, beneath the umbrella of higher education, so the modern school, too, never really came to grips with the task of sorting out the kind of education needed by pupils who would enter a rapidly changing society. It was saved from doing so by the uncertainties about its purpose. It was partly designed to inculcate basic skills in the wage-earning classes, and this vocational aspect was reflected in some of them by the development of courses tailored to local industry. But it was partly concerned, too, to promote a kind of self-realization which owed nothing to vocational ends, nor to the academic curriculum of the grammar school. So the timetable might use a topic like 'the home' to give a thematic link between different areas of content, and possibly bring several teachers together to give it coordinated treatment. But without a clear idea of what its real aim was, work of this kind could easily become seriously undemanding. Moreover, on top of these influences was the need for the modern school to prove itself: a hopeless task, since it was defined as a secondrate institution for secondrate pupils by the bipartite structure itself.

Second, there was a further element which the grammar and modern schools had in common. Despite their different styles, both regarded the curriculum as made up of subjects. The grammar school defined them in terms of examination syllabuses, while the more forward-looking modern school saw them as ways of structuring topics which might gain the child's interest. Either way, the separate subject was the basic building brick, and the teacher's function was defined by his subject specialism.

Third, the reasons for replacing these two different institutions with the single comprehensive school were negative. It was not that the new school was seen as one which could alone secure new educational objectives; rather, it was an alternative which ought to lead to less parent dissatisfaction. If it also led to better pupil performance, it would be the result not of a new curriculum, but a better use of the two existing ones.

Any discussion of a common school system for all the nation's children must take into consideration the nature of education itself. And the decisions which determine educational policies are political decisions, because they affect the distribution of life opportunities in society. The new comprehensive system was designed to ensure better teaching procedures and more efficient management, but at the same time it also raised fundamental questions about values and priorities, which neither the grammar nor the modern school had been able to answer.

In the event some time was to elapse before these questions were asked. Comprehensive schools grew steadily in number during the 'sixties and early 'seventies without any clear statement from any quarter concerning their educational purpose. The enabling Circular 10 of 1965 was about the mechanics of assembling the schools, rather than about their aims or activities. Political decisions went by default: the prevailing policy was in effect no policy at all.

We have noted, in considering the way in which the comprehensive school took shape, that in some ways this was inevitable. Although it was needed, it was not at all clear exactly what it was for. The schools were not, therefore, valued for their own sake. For example, a poll published in *New Society* in 1967 (26 October) showed that although 52 per cent of those sampled were in favour of comprehensive schooling, only 16 per cent would choose it for their own child, and 76 per cent wished to see the grammar schools retained.

Lack of a comprehensive rationale

While the political parties were not disposed to resist the extension of comprehensive schooling, they found it hard to see any real advantage in taking policies much further. The Labour Party could not be sure that an all-out commitment to comprehensive education would win votes, and the Conservative Party could be equally certain that an attempt to prune it would lose votes. It might be thought that good government is likely to follow when parties take the lead in shaping opinion; after all, educational issues are complex by nature, and the average voter can hardly be expected to work out for himself the course of action that would best benefit the whole of society. And these were times when the growing public interest in the new schools offered an opportunity to think about what they might achieve, and how they could be encouraged to do it.

Instead, the 'sixties saw a conscious retreat from anything that looked like a real live educational issue, and an emphasis on the purely technical problems of how to assemble a comprehensive school from the existing staff and buildings. This state of tacit non-intervention suited everyone except those who had to make the new schools work. It suited the political parties, since they could follow the trend of opinion and avoid the risk of an electoral accident. It suited local authority administrators, who found the tasks of knocking schools together difficult enough without having party bickering to contend with. It also suited the teachers in their professional organizations, because the doctrine of 'leave the schools to work out the details' gave them a unique chance to improve their

status, widen their power base, and enhance teacher autonomy.

But this newfound professionalism was forged not from the distinctive needs of the new comprehensives, but from the styles and practices of the obsolescent grammar and modern schools. There were no new ideals to put in their place, and so the new comprehensives were assembled on an additive model. A grammar school package, complete with one set of aims and attitudes and possibly staff to match, would be laid on top of a secondary modern package, which took its ideals from different sources and worked them out in its own different ways. The adoption of broad ability bands as a way of grouping children in the first two or three years of secondary schooling made it possible to combine a basic general education for all with a bipartite structure, so that the curriculum would begin to diverge from band to band often as early as the first year, and certainly by the third when only the abler children would be deemed suitable to start a second foreign language. And in the fourth and fifth years, leading to O-levels for some, the new CSE examinations for others and non-examination courses for the rest, the solution was the device of the option scheme, which had been originated in the more progressive grammar schools in the late 'fifties. This 'core-plus-options' model is met now in almost all comprehensives: usually English and mathematics make up the core along with religious and physical education, leaving the pupil to select the subjects which make up the remaining 70 per cent or so of his timetable from a list arranged, as a rule, in from five to seven columns from each of which one must be taken. Within each column, the presence of subjects at various ability levels means that the old bipartite structure shapes up as inexorably as ever.

The weaknesses of this curriculum pattern have been widely recognized since 1974, when the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) survey *A Matter of Choice* (M. Reid *et al.* 1974) exposed many of them. But comprehensive schools can scarcely be blamed for doing what comes naturally; in the absence of any kind of positive educational policy, the result was bound to be a differentiated curriculum reflecting the virtues and vices of its grammar and modern school components. What is remarkable is that, despite piecemeal curriculum change and the demands of an expanding population throughout the 'sixties and early 'seventies, the first-generation comprehensive school, in those areas where it has been able to grow to maturity, has managed to take on an identity and even out-perform the bipartite system it supplanted. In the end, though, the key questions regarding the purpose of mass secondary education had to come to the surface. And, eventually, they did.

1.2 Politics and educational change

The idea that there might be more than one way of running a comprehensive school made front-page news from 1969 onwards, when the 'Black Papers' provided a platform for an assortment of mainly right-wing views from a mixed bag of contributors. The general tone was strongly critical of 'progressive' ideas: the word took on a pejorative aspect, and seems to have suffered permanent damage. Gone are the associations of thoughtful child-centredness, of Montessori and Dewey: progressive education is a term the teacher now uses at his peril. The new image is of tatty worksheets, woolly-minded liberalism, and declining academic standards. As a political intervention, the Black Papers had an effect out of all proportion to their power base. Much of this was the result of an ill-judged attack on them by the Labour Minister of Education, Edward Short, in the House of Commons. The resulting publicity was just what the Black Paper authors needed. And their criticisms of ill-considered innovation were not without some substance.

The economic problems resulting from the oil crisis of 1974 pushed education into fresh prominence. Educational expenditure had shown a steady growth in real terms since the early 'sixties, and it was a good time to ask awkward questions about value for money. The public mood was changing in other ways, too. The 'sixties saw the liberation of Britain from austerity and tight-lipped morality. Consumer choice went hand in hand with industrial growth, while pop music and miniskirts were outward signs of a society which had labelled itself permissive. Village primary schools closed their doors without undue rancour, since the merits of larger units were taken for granted. In education as in industry, increase in size meant better cost-effectiveness, and more choice. And in comprehensives, size meant more subjects in the fourth-year options, and better use of sixth-form staff. Any fears that larger schools might mean less personal attention were offset by the massive growth in the pastoral care and counselling industry.

All this began to change in the 'seventies, as faith in the virtues of high technology and central decision-making declined. And after such strong reactions as flower power and rioting students had burnt themselves out, the feeling remained that more people ought to have a say in things, and that life should become better adapted to people. Small, in a word, became beautiful.

This caught comprehensive schools on the wrong foot. Though their average size had settled down to no more than about 900 pupils, somehow the schools had become linked with an imper-

sonal approach, and novelty for its own sake. The rise of curriculum development projects, from small beginnings in the early 'sixties, seemed to reinforce this view. Comprehensive schools began to get a bad press: their lapses attracted publicity, while their achievements went unnoticed. Meantime the grammar schools came to have the nostalgic appeal of a bygone world. All the latent uncertainties about the educational rationale for the comprehensive school stirred in the public mind, and by 1976 secondary education had, after a decade or more of Butskellite torpor, become a major social issue and a matter for party politics.

The assault on the 'secret garden'

The risk of losing the initiative was averted, for the Labour Party, by James Callaghan's speech on education at Ruskin College, Oxford, in the autumn of that year. In calling for a 'great debate' on education, he stated its aims as being: 'To equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in society and also to fit them for a job of work. Not one or the other, but both.'

The emphasis on the child taking his place at work and in society, rather than developing his own understanding within it, reflected a view of education as an instrumental activity for which society paid, and from which society expected to benefit. It caught accurately the prevailing mood of the time, and the mounting interest in ways of making schools accountable for their use of scarce resources. It was taken up again in a subsequent Green Paper. But the background document for the Prime Minister's speech was a paper specially prepared by the Department of Education and Science (DES), and never published: the so-called 'Yellow Book'. Leaked versions of it suggest that many aspects of comprehensives came in for sharp criticism. It undoubtedly represented the views of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, and broadly confirmed a principal argument of the Black Papers: that schools had become over-concerned with social aims, at the expense of the more evidently academic ones. The Schools Council was singled out for having a 'mediocre performance'.

There was an irony in this, since the DES was substantially represented on the Schools Council's major committees. There is truth in the charge that if the DES and the Inspectorate were so very concerned about the state of things, they took an unconscionably long time to bring themselves to say so. I shall look at these questions in more detail in chapter 8. For the moment, it is important to point out that the Inspectorate elected, from the early 'sixties until the early 'seventies, to play a passive role in the unfolding drama of

comprehensive growth. This was, again, in line with the political verities of the time. But there was an interesting development in 1960, on the very threshold of these years of haphazard curriculum change. For the then Conservative Minister of Education, David Eccles, declared that the curriculum looked rather like a 'secret garden', and that the time was ripe for the DES to establish a Curriculum Study Group.

The suggestion was hardly likely to find favour with the teachers' organizations, and the local education authorities were equally suspicious of any attempt by the centre to usurp their delegated functions. Eccles's description of the proposed group as a 'task force' scarcely helped matters, and in the event, the result of some energetic pressure group politicking was the launching of the Schools Council in 1964, with the teachers firmly in control. It now seems likely that the Inspectorate was not unhappy with this outcome; for in 1977 Lord Eccles remarked, looking back, that 'I wanted the HMIs taken out of the building and made into a think-tank, a research and development unit' (quoted in Devlin and Warnock, 1977). In his view, the plan failed because the HMIs were not keen on the idea: 'They had too much liking for being big people when they went round schools.'

Influence of the Schools Council

Teacher dominance of the Schools Council might have influenced its policies in a variety of ways. It might, for instance, have meant a readiness to make curriculum development funds available to individual innovating schools, or for local initiatives of various kinds. In practice it meant the reverse: a centralist emphasis on national projects, almost always in terms of the separate subjects of which the curriculum was composed, and by which teacher professionalism was defined. Even more significantly, many of these projects were conceived as appropriate for only part of the ability range. Thus 1970 saw both the Geography 14–18 Project, 'primarily for the more able pupils', and the Geography for the Young School Leaver Project, for 'pupils of average and below-average ability'. It is clear that the bipartite structure which had been carried over into comprehensive schools had, in its turn, continued as late as 1970 to influence the thinking of the country's only national curriculum change agency.

Furthermore, the council went out of its way to refrain from any steps which might indicate what its own policy for the curriculum might be. Teacher autonomy was interpreted as the right to choose from a range of novelties. By the early 'seventies there were no less

than seven science projects attracting council funds, and producing at least teacher material, if not pupil material: Science 5–13, Educational Use of Living Organisms, Progress in Learning Science, Nuffield Combined Science, Project Technology, Nuffield Secondary Science, and the Integrated Science Project. Meanwhile, the Nuffield Foundation could offer its own O-level projects in physics, chemistry and biology, while Scottish Integrated Science had its supporters on both sides of the border.

Curriculum development was seen mainly as a matter of updating content, and content was usually seen in separate subject compartments. The schools were free to choose what they fancied, but the projects were led by central teams who worked out the new ideas, and then tried them out in the schools. This approach to modernization owed much to the American experience in launching new industrial projects, and Havelock (1971) has termed it the Research, Development and Diffusion (or RDD) model of curriculum change. The central team does the research, and develops the materials; these are tried out in pilot schools, and finally made available to all the other eager consumers. The model is discussed further in chapter 8.

This approach may be valid in industry and commerce, where the product can be clearly specified and procedural steps taken to establish it. In education, however, everything depends on transactions between teacher and pupil. These cannot be specified: the process is interactive and the teacher must be at the front end of any innovation, rather than the passive receiver at the rear. This is not to deny a place for national projects, but to argue that they must be on a much less centralized structure than was favoured by the Schools Council throughout the 'sixties. (The 1970 Geography 14–18 Project, for example, represents a significant move in this direction.)

Approaches to the whole curriculum

By the time of the 1977 Green Paper, *Education in Schools*, many educationists had raised doubts about curriculum theory and practice. But few of these had penetrated to the schools, where the combination of option schemes and subject-bound thinking had led to the 'cafeteria curriculum'. The Schools Council's sole attempt to look at the curriculum as a whole appeared as Working Paper 53 in 1975, after four years' deliberation by a working party which, as Reid (1978) points out, was 'wholly from the educational establishment, and . . . heavily weighted towards secondary heads and teachers'. Yet they were not chosen for any particular knowledge of curriculum matters, for the report states that 'Members . . . were