

THE POLITICS OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Denis Lawton

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Preface

For a number of years my colleagues and I at the London Institute of Education Curriculum Studies Department have been using an approach to curriculum studies which has as its central concept the definition of curriculum in terms of 'a selection from the culture of a society'. This has proved very fruitful, but occasionally the obvious question is asked: 'Who selects?'. Our general answer has been a simple one – 'teachers'. This is a useful answer because part of our purpose has been to encourage all teachers to be more aware both of the necessity to think clearly about their contribution to the curriculum and also about the need for planning the whole curriculum.

But the answer that teachers make the selection from the culture is only true in a limited way. We have also to analyse the various constraints on teachers' freedom: the DES, inspectors, LEAs, examinations and so on. What kind of influence or control is exerted by all these? At the present time this is an even more important question because the picture is a changing one – for example, there are faint but discernible signs that the DES is attempting to exert more central influence.

The picture is not a clear one, but it seemed an appropriate time to attempt to sketch out various influences on the curriculum. The sketch is tentative and incomplete: there are serious gaps in the general picture. For example, we know far too little about the functioning of LEAs in relation to school curricula (Kogan's excellent book about the role of

Preface

the Chief Education Officer, *County Hall* (1973), does not have a single entry for curriculum in the index). Much basic research work remains to be done in this field, but it was felt that enough important changes were being discussed – the Schools Council, the APU, examinations – to justify the publication of a deliberately polemical book about curriculum control.

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Chapter 1

The meaning of politics

This book is not mainly about party politics and the curriculum, but about the question 'who controls the curriculum of secondary schools?' The answer is not a simple one, and the question itself is of fairly recent origin, only becoming important when the curriculum began to be called into question. When there was no controversy about the content of the curriculum, there was no argument about its control. When the curriculum becomes controversial, however, it is essentially a political controversy. There are two interrelated problems: the distribution of knowledge in society; and the decision-making involved.

If we take 1944 as a crucial date in the development of secondary education, it would be true to say that the following ten years or so were dominated by the debate about the tripartite system: should there be separate schools for different kinds of ability or comprehensive schools catering for all children? By the late 1950s that battle was largely over, and for about the next ten years the discussion shifted to questions of grouping and school organisation: should comprehensive schools be divided vertically into houses or horizontally into year groups? Should we have streaming, or setting, or banding, or mixed ability groups?¹ By 1965 these questions about structure had developed, to some extent, into questions about the content of the curriculum, partly stimulated by the work of the Schools Council.² At the same time some educationists began asking the more fundamental question 'What is the point of a common school unless we have a

common curriculum which transmits a common culture?’

By the mid-1960s it was also becoming clear that the period of consensus in education since 1944 had obscured a number of fundamental ideological problems about the nature of education. From then on disputes often centred on the question of ‘the comprehensive school’ but they went much deeper than a difference of opinion about whether grammar schools should survive or not. The Black Papers³ (from 1969 onwards) helped to illustrate at least two of these areas of conflict: whether schools should concentrate on an elite few or on the majority; whether the purpose of education was to develop individuals or to socialise children to fit in to the existing social structure.

On the first of those issues the Labour Party has always been divided, and that is one reason for deciding to avoid identifying party politics with the politics of the curriculum: it is much more complicated than a simple left *versus* right confrontation. Within the Labour Party, many individuals valued grammar schools because they had helped bright working-class youngsters to climb the ladder of opportunity: for this group of politicians (and many others) comprehensive schools would only be ‘successful’ if they enabled more working-class pupils to climb even higher up the ladder and away from their own social origins. For such Labour Party ‘elitists’ an important feature of comprehensive schools would be selection and streaming so that the ‘able’ would be helped on their journey upwards and not held back by those less gifted.

This debate goes back a long way in labour history. As early as 1897 the Trades Union Congress had demanded a policy of secondary education for all, condemning the segregation of elementary and secondary-school pupils. At that stage they were firmly against the elitist basis of the grammar-school curriculum. But the Fabian Society, and in particular Sidney and Beatrice Webb, had pursued a policy very much in the liberal tradition of utilitarian philosophy, justifying selection on grounds of economic and social efficiency.⁴ So there is a fundamental difference in outlook, even between those in the same political party (the Labour Party); it may be convenient to label one group egalitarians and the other

elitists, although this terminology is not entirely satisfactory. Egalitarians want a worthwhile curriculum for all children; elitists are concerned to select the brightest for a superior, academic curriculum.

The question 'who shall be educated?' is clearly related to the question of 'what are schools for?' – is it to make life more worthwhile for all individuals, or to make society work more efficiently? Sidney and Beatrice Webb and many early Fabians belonged to the philosophical tradition which emphasised education as a means of making society a better place in the sense of a more efficient organisation. Sidney Webb's book *London Education* (1904) described the kind of 'capacity catching' machinery of scholarships which would ensure efficient leadership for society at home and in the British Empire. Webb was totally opposed to the idea of a common school with a common curriculum, and accepted the Morant policy (1902-4) of sharp differentiation between elementary and secondary curricula. In fact Sidney Webb's views were so similar to the Conservative policy on secondary education at that time that in January 1901 Sir John Gorst, the Conservative education minister, distributed proof copies of Webb's Fabian Manifesto *The Educational Muddle and the Way Out* in support of the Conservative policy of clearly separating elementary and secondary schools, but providing a scholarship ladder which would enable a few very bright working-class children to pass from elementary schools into the secondary schools.⁵ In the House of Commons the two members sponsored by the Labour Representative Committee (the precursor of the Parliamentary Labour Party) opposed the 1902 Education Bill; at that time the majority of the Labour Movement was on their side, but an influential part of the Fabian Society had firmly established a non-socialist tradition which the Labour Party was later to inherit and to preserve.

The Labour Movement as a whole tended to see the 1902 Act as a piece of class legislation. In their social and educational views the Labour Movement covered a very wide range: 'Elitism and egalitarianism with Webb at one end, Thorne and Hobson at the other, and the ILP somewhere in the middle, provided the limits within which Labourism was

set rather than the framework on which it was built' (Barker, 1972, p. 18).⁶ The dispute was, of course, not simply about the structure of education into secondary and elementary: the content of the curriculum was at stake as well.

A more recent version of the dispute between egalitarians and elitists centres on the word 'meritocratic'. In 1958 Michael Young published *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which should have succeeded in demolishing the meritocratic point of view. The book was described as a fable narrating the development of a meritocratic society some time in the future. A society (England in the future) is described where 'I.Q. plus effort = merit'.⁷ This was a society where the most intelligent had to be detected at an early age and given the opportunity to benefit from an intensive educational programme. If they responded with appropriate effort they were ultimately rewarded by being allotted a position in life in accordance with their carefully calculated 'merit'. It was, needless to say, described as a nightmare world where efficiency took precedence over humanity, and where those who lacked measured ability were destined to a carefully planned inferior life. Implicitly the question was asked (which had been ignored by many who considered themselves to be concerned with social justice): if it is unfair for children to have a better education because they happen to be born rich, is it any less unfair for children to have preferential treatment because they happen to be born with a high IQ?

One of the messages in Young's book was that the meritocratic position rests on an inadequate view of democracy: true democracy in a free society should include a better quality of life for *all*, and the vast majority of the population should have access to worthwhile educational experiences, not just an elite few — whether they are a social or an intellectual elite.

So one 'political' dispute about the curriculum is whether an educational programme should be planned for the most able pupils which is quite different in content and form from the curriculum designed for the majority. A related (but distinct) question is whether there should be a curriculum planned for all pupils which has some common elements.

If it is decided to give a superior curriculum to the elite