

Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://hse.hipatiapress.com>

Curriculum Change in English Schools: Educating Working-Class Children

Terry Wrigley¹

1) Leeds Beckett University. UK

Date of publication: October 23rd, 2014

Edition period: Edition period: October 2014-February 2015

To cite this article: Wrigley, T. (2014). Curriculum Change in English Schools: Educating Working-Class Children. *Social and Education History* 3(3), 209-240. doi:10.4471/hse.2014.14

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/hse.2014.14>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) (CC-BY).

Curriculum Change in English Schools: Educating Working-Class Children

Terry Wrigley
Leeds Beckett University

Abstract

This paper presents a summary and political analysis of curriculum change in English schools, with a particular focus on how working-class children are educated. It first examines, briefly, the period from 1870 (compulsory elementary education) to 1945 (secondary schools for all), and then in some greater detail significant progressive reforms up to the 1970s. Finally, examining the period from the 1988 Education Reform Act, the contrast and interplay between neoliberal and neoconservative policies are discussed. The impact of high-stakes accountability on working-class pupils is examined, and particularly on the increasing numbers growing up in poverty. The paper seeks to offer concepts and ideas to shed light on what is happening in other education systems, however different the specific chronology and politics.

Keywords: working-class, English schools, curriculum



Cambio Curricular en las Escuelas Inglesas: la Educación de la Infancia de la Clase Obrera

Terry Wrigley
Leeds Beckett University

Abstract

Este artículo presenta un resumen y análisis político de cambio curricular en las escuelas inglesas, con un enfoque particular sobre cómo se educa a los niños de la clase trabajadora. Primero se examina brevemente, el período comprendido entre 1870 (en la educación primaria obligatoria) y 1945 (escuelas secundarias para todos), y luego en mayor detalle las importantes reformas progresivas hasta la década de 1970. Por último, se examina el período de la Ley de Reforma de la Educación de 1988, discutiendo el contraste y la interacción de las políticas neoliberales y neoconservadoras. Se examina el impacto de rendición de cuentas en los alumnos de la clase trabajadora, y en particular sobre el incremento del número que crecen en la pobreza. El artículo trata de ofrecer conceptos e ideas para dar luz sobre lo que está sucediendo en otros sistemas educativos, aún en la diferencia de cronología y políticas específicas.

Palabras clave: clase obrera, escuelas inglesas, curriculum



This paper presents a short history of curriculum change in England, with a focus on working-class children. I am using the term ‘working class’ here in a traditional sense to refer to manual workers of various skill levels but also less skilled or lower paid clerical or ‘service’ workers (eg waiters, shop assistants, care assistants). This is clearly not as broad as a Marxist sense of ‘proletariat’, which would also include other employees such as teachers or computer programmers, but it encompasses large sections of the population which the ruling class in England has reluctantly educated. School achievement for this group has tended to be lower than for professional and managerial groups, especially those with a university education, and particularly low for workers living in poverty.

It focuses particularly on the years of compulsory education (ages 5-16), but with occasional references to pre-school and young adults. The time scales may appear strange to readers from other education systems: for example, the 1970s were a particularly progressive period in England while Spain still endured Franco. I hope, however, that readers will find general ideas meaningful in different situations.

The narrative is specific to England, rather than the whole UK. Scotland throughout this period had a separate education system, with different traditions and ideologies. Its Calvinist reformation had emphasised universal education from the start, universal literacy was achieved earlier, and scholarships provided for more academic boys and girls from poor families to study at university. In the present day, the impact of neoliberalism on the school system is much less. The contrast provides an interesting lesson: the impact of a capitalist economy and society on education is not straightforward, but is mediated by other cultural factors including religion.

The paper will first provide a brief introduction to the period from 1870, when elementary education was made compulsory, to 1945, the introduction of universal secondary education, but as a background to the more detailed analysis of recent decades. A particular theoretical focus is on the contradictory nature of popular education under capitalism. The case of England exemplifies acute tensions between the need to educate for industrial efficiency and the fear that workers might acquire a critical

understanding and reject an inferior social position. To express this succinctly, ‘capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable but not wise enough to know what’s really going on’ (Wrigley, 2006, p. 8). However, the particular responses of policy makers to this dilemma are never straightforward or obvious. In the case of England, it led to unresolved tensions between a neoliberal functionalism and a neoconservative emphasis on social order and tradition.

Origins and Legacy: 1870-1945

The conditions under which mass education was established in 1870 have an enduring effect which distinguishes England from some other European countries. Curriculum formation was built on class differences from the start, with a sharp divide between the basic literacy and numeracy skills taught in publicly funded elementary schools for the manual working class and a more extended pseudo-classical schooling in independent schools for those who could afford to pay. These origins continue to offer archetypes, myths and images which influence policy makers and public opinion. Typically, these elite schools are held up as the standard by which schools for workers’ children are judged inadequate.

The state system was never intended to provide a broad or liberating curriculum. In the words of Robert Lowe, the politician largely responsible for compulsory schooling in Britain:

We do not profess to give these children [i.e. those whose parents cannot afford to pay] an education that will raise them above their station and business in life... We are bound to make up our minds as to how much instruction that class requires, and is capable of receiving. (cited by Tropp, 1957, p. 89)

Despite anxieties about economic competition from Germany, where industrialisation was accelerated by universal schooling, the ruling class in England feared it would increase the potential for social unrest. Schooling for the urban poor had to be economically functional whilst maintaining habits of subordination.

A curriculum of basic literacy and numeracy was accompanied by socialisation into obedient and compliant workers along with pride in the British Empire. Schools were placed under strict control through the Payment By Results system: this was based on annual inspectors' visits to determine how many children were meeting required standards in tasks such as reading aloud, neat handwriting, correct spelling and mental arithmetic. There was no policy ambition beyond the efficient transmission of a limited skills set, and quality was seen in terms of accuracy in reproductive tasks rather than cognitive development, critical thinking or creativity.

From the start, however, many teachers resisted such narrowness and the way it was policed, and many teachers tried to overcome its limits, including basic introductions to history, geography, science and creative arts. This resistance was a core principle of the National Union of Elementary Teachers, founded in 1870 and which later became the National Union of Teachers.

The only compulsory subjects in 1871 were reading, writing, arithmetic and (for girls) needlework and cutting out. After the demise of Payment By Results, additional minor subjects could include singing, recitation, drawing, geography, history, science and home economics. Geography and history provided a kind of political education: young people needed to see the British imperial possessions marked pink on the globe and gain a sense of national glory. (For sources and further details, see [Lawson & Silver, 1973](#))

In the early 20th Century in some districts, 'higher grade schools' provided vocational courses for some older working-class pupils. Physical training, as military-style drill, received a boost when Boer War recruitment revealed the poor physical state of the urban poor.

However, apart from raising the school leaving age to 14 after 1918, little changed in the elementary curriculum and the desperate underfunding and large classes continued to limit learning. Wider educational opportunities for workers were limited to evening classes in technical work-related skills in Technical Colleges, for those who still found time and energy after long working days.

Education beyond elementary level was mainly limited to families who could afford to pay, whether in local grammar schools for the middle class or in elite boarding schools. In both, the curriculum was traditional and mainly

abstract, with an emphasis on classics for much of this period. Some scholarships were made available in grammar schools, particularly for potential elementary school teachers, from the early 20th Century, but the pupils had to follow a traditional academic pattern with little time left after English, mathematics, science, French and Latin. Even for pupils who were capable of passing the scholarship exam at age 11, there were massive financial and cultural barriers to entering the grammar school. My mother recalls the headmistress of her Catholic elementary school, a nun, warning her that her family were too poor to afford the expensive school uniform of the Catholic grammar school - which, in fact, belonged to the same religious order.

1945 Reforms

The Labour government of 1945 introduced many important social reforms, including a health service, more social housing and welfare benefits, and the nationalisation of industries such as coal and railways. Its major education reform was secondary education for all, with a change of school at age 11. However this was seriously undermined by segregating children into different schools, based on the hegemonic idea that children were born with different kinds of brain. The Norwood Committee (1943) distinguished between:

the pupil who is interested in learning for its own sake... the pupil whose interests and abilities lie markedly in the field of applied science or applied art... [and finally the pupil who] deals more easily with concrete things than with ideas.

On this basis, pupils were divided into grammar, technical and 'secondary modern' schools according to their scores in a test at age 10. (In many areas the division was simply between grammar and secondary modern, as not all local authorities established technical schools.) The government accepted the idea that clever working class children would have an equal opportunity to enter grammar schools by passing the exam, though in reality relatively few did so; in fact in some poor neighbourhoods nobody went to grammar school.

The hegemonic belief that intelligence was fixed, genetically inherited and essentially about abstract thinking served to control and limit the secondary education of most working-class pupils for another 30 or so years, and continues to the present day in some parts of England.

The hierarchy and status of schools was never in doubt. Funding was seriously unequal. While the grammar school curriculum continued much as before, the secondary modern curriculum was restricted by a belief that its pupils had limited intelligence, the early school leaving age (14, later 15) and the absence of a final qualification.

At the same time, the lack of status of secondary modern schools did sometimes open up a space for teacher-led innovation in order to reach out to the learners (Jones, 2003, p. 23-8). For example:

It was the elementary and modern schools, and not the grammar schools, that sought to meet the needs of their students by setting aside disciplinary structures and developing and teaching courses with such titles as gardening, nutrition, food science, hygiene, health education and human or social biology (Jenkins, 2004, p. 168).

The 11 Plus exams, on the basis of which grammar school places were awarded, also restricted the upper primary curriculum. Ironically, given that its ‘general intelligence’ paper was supposed to measure something fixed and innate, most final year primary school classes spent a lot of time practising test papers to improve scores. Thus the majority of curriculum time was consumed by rapid and accurate processing in English and arithmetic and the artificial logic of ‘Intelligence Tests’. This also led many primary schools to stream pupils by ‘ability’, also distorted by teachers’ prejudice.

This selection process impacted on student identity, leading the majority of working-class pupils to accept this judgement of mental inferiority. Far fewer children from manual-worker families obtained grammar school places than in clerical or professional groups (Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 425).

The traditionalist ethos and curriculum of the grammar schools were remote from the home and neighbourhood culture of manual worker families, frequently leading to demotivation and alienation. (See, for

example, Richard Hoggart's chapter 'Scholarship Boy' in *The Uses of Literacy*, 1957)

In the secondary modern schools, and particularly for boys, the ethos was often based on a brutal discipline – also present, indeed, in boys' grammar schools - but even in more humane environments the assumptions about pupils' limited abilities and destinies had a constraining effect on curriculum and pedagogy.

An Emergent Progressivism

Despite this unpromising structure, the decades after World War II saw the emergence, on a small scale, of various progressive alternatives. Some comprehensive schools were opened, which taught all pupils from 11-16 or 11-18 regardless of ability. Progressive reforms which had begun in nursery schools, based on European kindergarten models, began to spread into primary schools, making it possible to engage children from a range of backgrounds in learning. Primary schools gradually stopped streaming.

This movement finally began to flourish around the 1970s once comprehensive schools were well established, the school leaving age raised to 16 and a certificate introduced for secondary modern pupils. Wider social and cultural change also had an impact, including a surge in trade union militancy, musical and stylistic culture in the 1960s, and the ideological impact of the 1968 revolts.

In secondary schools, curriculum reform was strongest in the subject English (Gibbons, 2014). Teachers formed a London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE), which later became the national association (NATE). They began to question the dominant paradigm of the subject, where the emphasis was on avoiding errors through a diet of technical exercises, along with samples from the literary canon. The reformers placed great emphasis on talk, as the foundation for literacy. They encouraged pupils to write about their own lives and neighbourhoods, shifting gradually from everyday styles to more formal writing. Reading was chosen to engage young people's interests and emotions, as well as to stimulate genuine discussion. These reforms had a positive impact on all pupils, but particularly opened up education to working-class children.

One key figure was Harold Rosen, who defiantly rejected Bernstein's claim that working class families were trapped in a 'restricted code' i.e. too caught up in their immediate surroundings to be capable of explicit public statements and discussion (Rosen, 1972). Another was Douglas Barnes, who demonstrated that exploratory learning in small groups allowed more active participation and developed language and thinking than whole-class questioning by the teacher (Barnes, 1976).

The implicit message of older methods in the subject was intolerable to these reformers, namely the message that working class children that working class children did not know how to speak their own language. The group recognised the importance of respecting and building upon vernacular versions of English in speech, and were quick to understand that young people whose migrant families spoke other languages had a cultural asset which schools should appreciate and develop rather than suppress. This new understanding, along with the growing recognition that language and literacy development take place across the curriculum, led to official recognition in the Bullock Report (1975).

As large numbers of migrants from the former British Empire settled, especially from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, teachers became increasingly conscious of the need to challenge racial stereotypes. Its initial form of a 'multicultural curriculum' tended to focus on visible cultural features, for example religious symbols and forms of dress, but this was soon criticised as superficial and tokenist, a freezing of cultural heritage. Critics demanded a sharper and more explicit challenge to racism (anti-racism), though the need to encourage cultural recognition and respect remains.

In 1972 the school leaving age was raised to 16, ensuring that working-class pupils stayed at school long enough to take public examinations. This prompted considerable curriculum development including the *Humanities Curriculum Project* (popularly known as 'Stenhouse' after its director), a social studies programme which engaged learners in open discussion prompted by contrasting texts about controversial issues. (See Stenhouse, 1971) In their different ways, these projects began to transform the positions of teacher and learner, made schools less authoritarian, and involved

working-class pupils in a critical study of familiar issues such as relationships, crime and war.

The influence of European models of early education (Froebel, Montessori etc.) became more widespread, extending to age 11. There was a widespread, though uneven, transformation to a broader, more creative and child-centred curriculum which raised standards both in terms of basic skills and children's knowledge of the world. There was greater understanding of the effects of poverty and deprivation. The Plowden Report (1967) gave this official recognition and accelerated the development, though it was far from universal. Even so, there was significant transformation in large numbers of primary schools, certainly enough to panic the political Right who accused it of 'lowering standards'. They saw a more situated approach to literacy and numeracy as neglecting 'the basics', and accused teachers of failing to insist on accuracy because they no longer taught these sub-skills out of context through spelling lists and punctuation exercises.

A common practice was to rearrange part of the curriculum around a *theme* to bring greater coherence. Subject content and skills were related to themes such as Energy, Autumn or The Victorians. *Project work* (sometimes *topic work*) involved children in independent research of a topic of personal interest deriving from the class's current learning.

The reform process was overtaken rapidly as Progressive Education per se came under intense attack. A moral panic was created, claiming that standards were falling as a result of progressivism and comprehensive schools (i.e. the end of a system which largely segregated working class pupils into lower status schools).

In fact, as the following data shows, these inclusive and democratic reforms were actually bringing about a dramatic rise in overall achievement and opening up learning for many working class children. In 1962, when around 20% of children were selected for grammar schools, only 16% of 16 year olds achieved five O-level passes. Now the majority achieve this high standard. In the early 1960s less than 10% went to university, but this had increased to over 40% by 2002 (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 217). The moral panic was, however, sufficient to enable Margaret Thatcher, as prime minister from 1979 to 1990, to achieve a kind of counter-revolution in schools.

Curriculum, Society and Ideology

A Selective Tradition

To make sense of these struggles, a good starting point is to recognise that any curriculum is unavoidably a selection from the totality of knowledge, and that the process of selection is underpinned by political ideology. This section aims to examine some of the determining principles.

The form and power of a curriculum, whether based on an exam syllabus, professional habits, or a standardised National Curriculum, gives the impression of being authoritative, neutral or fixed. It is often difficult for teachers to question its norms.

Raymond Williams pointed out that the curriculum can only ever be a selection from the wider culture. The tradition it is built on, however sacrosanct it appears, is a 'selective tradition'. His own work on English literature challenged not only the content - the list of officially worthwhile texts - but also the ways in which we are expected to read them and the questions which it seems legitimate to ask. By stepping outside these parameters and looking at history and culture along with literary texts, he noticed structural features which others didn't. For example:

Neighbours in Jane Austen are not the people actually living nearby; they are the people living a little less nearby who, in social recognition, can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through the holes of this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. To be face-to-face in this world is already to belong to a class (Williams, 1985, p. 166).

The curriculum often omits and excludes in socially prejudiced ways, as Bertold Brecht succinctly points out in his comment on how history is often presented to young people:

Questions from a Worker who Reads
... Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not even have a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada sank.
Was he the only one to cry? (Brecht, 1935)

A curriculum can marginalise particular groups in terms of social level, gender or ‘race’, whether through omission or stereotyping, including presenting them as helpless victims or denying them voice and agency.

The process is not always conscious manipulation, nor is the result always logical or coherent: sometimes individuals are simply pursuing what they assume to be common sense. At other times, there is clear evidence of political interference. In either case, it is essential to challenge the apparent innocence of a curriculum, understanding that the way education relates to society is a form of power.

A common assumption is that only higher social strata should receive a broad academic, scientific and cultural education, while the majority are given ‘the basics’ plus some training for work. At some point a common curriculum splits into two or more tracks, whether at age 11, 14 or 16, depending on economic and political circumstances. The earlier this division occurs, the more likely it becomes for working-class pupils to be caught in a lower / vocational track.

The term *vocational* is itself deeply ideological in English. It is clearly not used in the same sense as when we speak of a priest’s or teacher’s sense of vocation, nor do we tend to classify Law, Medicine or Architecture as vocational degrees. Vocational is not a neutral term denoting preparation for employment but suggests work of a less exalted and more routine kind. In curricular terms, ‘vocational’ is contrasted with ‘academic’.

This has roots in an English aristocratic disdain for the practical, and is not a universal feature of modern capitalism. There is also no logical reason why vocational courses should not include critical social understanding. Professionals training in the hairdressing and beauty industry could, for instance, look at gender issues; future plumbers might benefit from a broader environmental understanding.

Conservative Reaction 1979-1997

Accusations about the supposed sloppiness of progressive teaching methods was even seen as a threat to the social fabric. In 1985 a senior government

minister Norman Tebbit suggested this would lead to the breakdown of law and order.

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people can turn up filthy and nobody takes any notice of them at school – just as well as turning up clean – all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose your standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime (cited by Graddol, 1991, p.52).

In the Conservative imagination, *grammar* came to signify both accurate Standard English and the lamented grammar schools; the word *standards* merged academic performance with public order.

The recurrent New Right demand was for schools to return to the supposed rigours of disembedded knowledge and skills, since all attempts to relate learning to the life of the child or their society were seen as deficient. The 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990) became ever louder. In 1987, Margaret Thatcher informed her party conference:

Children who need to count and multiply are being taught antiracist Mathematics, whatever that may be. Children who need to be able to express themselves in clear English are being taught political slogans. Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay (Thatcher, 1987).

It was through such rhetorical gestures as much as legislation that the battle against progressive or critical curriculum was pursued.

In addition to English, history was an inevitable target. Repeated calls were made to remove critical interpretation: school history should be concerned with 'the transmission of an established view of the past' (Haydn, 2004). The possibility of interpreting history from a working class or anti-imperialist perspective was anathema.

The Inner London Education Authority, which had been a beacon of curriculum development, was finally abolished in 1990. Covering the most deprived areas of London, the ILEA had provided a quality of support that was the envy of teachers elsewhere, including curriculum centres for each

specialism where teachers not only attended courses but could collaborate actively in curriculum design and even have their ideas and resources published.

The National Curriculum: Enterprise and Heritage

This drive to eliminate progressivism culminated in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). This changed the managerial relationship between schools and education authorities, toughened up inspection, and mandated a National Curriculum and its associated national tests. Furthermore, the extensive powers it gave to future education ministers made it easy for them to bring about sweeping changes in line with their particular philosophies of education and nostalgic memories of their own schooldays (usually in elite schools). This has created a situation characterised by rapid, contradictory and often ill-conceived curriculum changes.

Paradoxically, headteachers were promised greater autonomy and were given it in administrative and organisational matters, but simultaneously they and the teachers lost professional control over the curriculum to central government. Schools also became subject to a rigorous system of surveillance through inspections, league tables of test and exam results, and ultimately teacher performance pay.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had first intended the National Curriculum to focus on ‘basic subjects’, i.e. ‘essential skills: reading, writing, spelling, grammar, arithmetic’ and ‘basic science and technology’, but gave way to her Secretary of State Kenneth Baker in his desire to define a complete curriculum from age 5 to 16. The National Curriculum was designed to be rigidly subject-based from the age of 5, based more or less on the subject list determined for state secondary schools in 1904 (Aldrich, 1988).

Overall the National Curriculum pushed in two directions, reflecting the old tension between increasing economic efficiency and ensuring that future workers remained subservient. This reflects Michael Apple’s US analysis (eg. 2000) of how neoliberalism and neoconservatism complement each other, or in Phillips’ explanation of Thatcherism:

New Right ideology consisted of ‘enterprise and heritage’ (Corner and Harvey, 1991)... a mixture of neo-liberal market individualism and neo-conservative emphasis upon authority, discipline, hierarchy, the nation and strong government (Levitas, 1986; Whitty, 1989) (Phillips, 1998, p. 4-5).

The National Curriculum gave a boost to mathematics, science, design technology and information technology (later known as the STEM subjects), occupying more than half the timetable. By contrast, the subjects which could particularly relate to socio-political understanding, particularly history, geography and English, were regarded as dangerous, and opportunities for critical or engaged thinking were carefully avoided. There was no place in the curriculum for a study of contemporary society, which had to wait until the later insertion of ‘Citizenship’, allocated only the weighting of a half subject in public examinations. In theory all social classes were now receiving the same curriculum, but the question is: what kind of curriculum, how does it relate to learners’ experience, and in whose interests?

Neo-conservative ideology in History can be ‘summarized under the headings of *authority*, *hierarchy* and *nation*’ (Phillips, 1998, my italics) but this applies more widely, to various degrees, across the humanities. Heavy demands for assessment were added, so that a primary teacher might have to make a thousand formal judgements in a single year.

The shift towards traditionalism increased (see Stephen Ball’s, 1993) A traditional corpus of knowledge or canon was re-emphasised, and the curriculum disconnected from learners’ identities and experience. In practical terms this had some bizarre consequences. In music, even performance came under attack:

For the restorationists music is not a putting together of sounds to create effect or a shared activity, it is not a matter of creativity but rather a lonely appreciation, a fossilised tradition, a mental abstraction divorced from the here and now and from the possibility of engagement... This is the curriculum as museum (ibid, p. 201).

For primary schools, education minister Kenneth Clarke triggered a media attack against the Plowden Report and its progressive values. ‘Child

centred’ became a term of abuse, and thoughts about child development were replaced by the discourse of ‘effectiveness’ and a return to traditional transmission methods.

The Victorian schoolroom and the grammar school are the lost objects of desire, standing for a time when education was simple, when learning meant doing and knowing what you were told by your teacher. Kenneth Clarke’s classroom has desks in rows, the children silent, the teacher ‘at the front’, chalk in hand, dispensing knowledge.... This is an education of deference, to the teacher, to the past, to the nation, and to your ‘elders and betters’ – the traditional values of Victorian middle-class childhood (Ball, 1993, p. 208).

All this resonated, once again, in the policies and rhetoric of Michael Gove, from 2010 to 2014.

Old Wine in a New Bottle: the New Utilitarians

Education policies in the past 20 years have been variations on a theme, showing only a different balance between a functionalist orientation towards skills for the economy and a neo-conservative insistence on traditional knowledge and national heritage. The election of a ‘New Labour’ government in 1997, under Tony Blair, saw a shift towards the former. According to Blair, in the context of globalisation politicians could have little impact on the economy other than to make Britain an attractive place to invest. ‘Education is our best economic policy’ (Blair, 2005, cited in Ball, 2008, p. 12). The logical consequence was policies which created the *illusion* of a well-qualified workforce and of relentless improvement in test and exam statistics.

Standardised Teaching

The 1988 Education Reform Act had been launched with a promise that, even though politicians would determine what must be taught, teachers decided how to teach it - or rather, in the new jargon, how to *deliver* it. The promise was soon broken by Labour ministers. After hasty and incomplete

piloting, supposedly more effective ways of teaching literacy and numeracy in primary schools were imposed in the form of the Literacy Hour and Numeracy Hour; this was later superseded by an even more restrictive approach, ‘synthetic phonics’.

The literacy hour separated English from the rest of the primary curriculum, curtailing opportunities for learning through reading and writing. Most of the time was devoted to whole-class instruction. This was ‘interactive’ only in a limited sense, a pseudo-dialogue dominated by teacher questions.

Illusions of Improvement

Initially the number of children reaching the target level for literacy at age 11 seemed to increase, and the government claimed to be raising standards for working class children, but there were problems below the surface. The tests had in fact been simplified: fewer questions involved interpretation or reading between the lines as opposed to simple factual recognition, making it easier to classify struggling readers as having reached the target level 4 (Hilton, 2001). Even so, test statistics soon hit a plateau and ministers changed to an even more limited method, a dogmatic insistence on the systematic and discrete teaching of synthetic phonics, although there was no research evidence to show it would improve understanding, as opposed to simply pronouncing the words correctly.

To create the impression of rapid improvement at age 16, easier alternatives to the standard GCSEs were introduced. Indeed, each subject in these alternative qualifications was declared the equivalent of four subjects at GCSE, which was totally unjustified. Not surprisingly, achievement appeared to rise rapidly, and particularly in poorer urban areas.

Blair’s government began to transfer lower-achieving inner-city schools to private companies, renaming them Academies. These privatised academies quickly exploited the easier qualifications, and on that basis politicians claimed that academies were improving faster than other schools (Wrigley & Kalambouka, 2012).

To the government’s embarrassment, England’s position in the PISA international tests was simultaneously going downhill. Moreover, the easier

qualifications, though supposedly work-related, did not in fact broaden the curriculum and open up more work-related subjects to attract working-class pupils: most were just easier versions of subjects available in the standard GCSE exams (eg science, computing, business studies).

Curriculum Narrowing

The years of Labour Government saw an increasing emphasis on vocational training, reflecting an overwhelming neoliberal orientation to employment skills. Finally, in 2006, the curriculum for 14-16 year olds was divided into two, re-establishing aspects of the old grammar school versus secondary modern divide. Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) was in effect divided into two separate tracks. For the more academic, the 1980s version of a broad and balanced curriculum was continued, including a social subject (history or geography), a creative arts subject (now including media), a language, and a branch of design and technology. For the 'less academic', these were replaced by an extended vocational course.

It should be understood that there was nothing new in 14-16 year olds following a vocational course, often in a nearby technical college, as part of a broad curriculum. In the comprehensive school where I taught in in the early 1970s, large numbers of 14-16 year olds studied childcare and car mechanics at school, or bricklaying and hairdressing at a technical college. In those days, however, nobody suggested that these same pupils should not also choose drama, geography or a language.

After 2006, pupils were required to make firm decisions to embark on vocational courses from age 14, narrowing their future pathways. Many working-class pupils were placed under pressure by their schools to switch to these vocational courses, since it would boost the school's statistics. Ironically the careers to which these were supposed to lead were becoming increasingly difficult to enter.

Thus, for many working class pupils from age 14, the school curriculum was now dominated by literacy and numeracy, increasingly framed as generic employment skills, along with a work-related diploma. Apart from ICT - the poster boy of Blair's modernisation – policy makers showed little interest in the rest of the curriculum and inevitably there followed a serious

decline in the number taking languages, history or geography from age 14. Artistic subjects such as music became less about creativity and more about business planning for events.

One movement in the opposite direction, a new subject Citizenship, was limited and tokenistic but opened up a little space for learning about contemporary society.

Overall however, curriculum policy under New Labour was characterised by neoliberal modernisation with little apparent concern about using curriculum to build community, or promote social engagement and critical analysis.

Under Fives

One of the most contradictory areas of change was in the early years. There was laudable extension of provision under Labour, including the entitlement to 12.5 hours a week of free nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds; but simultaneously an attempt to formalise early learning and make it more like school. Whilst many aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage were developmentally sound, the Statutory Guidance required that, from September 2008, all providers, whatever their educational philosophy, must ‘deliver’ and assess according to 69 ‘goals’. This espousal of an objectives-based curriculum had the potential to undermine play-based learning, and substitute instruction for the more experiential and collaborative ways in which young children develop language and understanding. The attempt to impose formal instruction was to continue under the next government (House, 2011).

The predominant discourse around the extension of nursery education was about the nation’s economic needs, including preventing children growing up in poverty from falling behind and having no employment skills. Meanwhile, only half-hearted and short-lived attempts were being made to cut child poverty itself.

Shock and Awe

Michael Gove's arrival as education minister in 2010 clearly signalled a swing towards neo-conservative values. It was possible to sympathise with some of his early moves as correctives, for example his concern about the marginalisation of History (Gove, 2010). Yet something much more disturbing was at work, namely an assault on anything which did not match his very narrow sense of 'knowledge'. His neo-conservatism was pursued alongside a neoliberal determination to privatise schools.

Timeless Knowledge

In a public lecture, Gove pronounced:

It was an automatic assumption of my predecessors in Cabinet office that the education they had enjoyed, the culture they had benefitted from, the literature they had read, the history they had grown up learning, were all worth knowing. They thought that the case was almost so self-evident it scarcely needed to be made. To know who Pericles was, why he was important, why acquaintance with his actions, thoughts and words matters, didn't need to be explained or justified. It was the mark of an educated person (Gove, 2011, cited in Yandell, 2013, p. 7).

It does not take great expertise in discourse analysis to trace here the self-assurance of an elite who believe their own tradition is beyond question, or the exclusivity of the minority who define themselves alone as educated.

Imperial Values

This return to a 'curriculum of the dead' was evident in his plan for National Curriculum History. Here Gove overreached himself: the advisers he had himself chosen turned against him. Less than three years earlier Gove had selected Simon Schama as his special adviser for history, but now Schama was ridiculing the minister's plans.

Schama explicitly challenged the re-emergence of the New Right ‘glorious heritage’ version of English history, and Gove’s attempt to remove controversy from its study:

There is a glory to British history, but the glory to British history is argument, dissent – the freedom to dispute. It’s not an endless massage of self-congratulation (Schama, 2013).

He was particularly outraged by the offensiveness and insensitivity of the new National Curriculum’s glorification of Empire:

Clive of India? Robert Clive was a sociopathic corrupt thug whose business in India was essentially to enrich himself and his co-soldiers and traders as quickly and outrageously as possible. (*ibid*)

In the end, Gove had to back down and sacrifice his tendentious version of History. Significantly, neo-liberalism trumped neo-conservatism. The greater political priority was elsewhere, in the economic functionality of Written English, Maths and Science (See *Primary Charter, 2013*). In line with neoliberal ideology, Gove was also intent on accelerating the transfer of schools into private management, and soon more than half of secondary schools had been converted to Academies.

Raising Standards?

The autocratic powers given to education ministers by the 1988 Act were exploited to the extreme in rewriting the National Curriculum, particular for primary schools. The key academic advisers for English, Maths and Science resigned in despair at Gove’s failure to listen. In March 2013 a letter signed by a hundred Education academics was reported on the front page of major national newspapers under the heading *Too Much Too Young* (*Hundred Academics, 2013*). This highlighted the excessive demands placed on very young children, but also the impact on pedagogy:

We are writing to warn of the dangers posed by Michael Gove’s new National Curriculum which could severely erode educational standards.

The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity.

Much of it demands too much too young. This will put pressure on teachers to rely on rote learning without understanding. Inappropriate demands will lead to failure and demoralisation.

The learner is largely ignored. Little account is taken of children's potential interests and capacities, or that young children need to relate abstract ideas to their experience, lives and activity (*ibid*).

Gove had repeatedly used declining PISA results to justify steps to 'raise standards', but the letter warned that this new curriculum would be counterproductive:

Mr Gove has clearly misunderstood England's decline in PISA international tests. Schools in high-achieving Finland, Massachusetts and Alberta emphasise cognitive development, critical understanding and creativity, not rote learning (*ibid*)

The Secretary of State's response was a rant in the Conservative press against 'bad academics' who were 'enemies of promise' and indeed 'Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools.' Gove constantly presented himself as the champion of working-class children, arguing that he was raising standards and that educational experts and other opponents were lowering expectations. In reality, he was limiting their learning to a thoughtless memorisation of facts, and raising barriers so that more of them would fail.

A Pied Piper Curriculum

When it was established that targets were pitched one or two years younger than in Finland or Singapore, the Department for Education simply shrugged this off with more 'high expectations' rhetoric. This was a failure to understand that children need time to develop. Gove had produced a Pied

Piper curriculum which was stealing childhood. This was neoliberalism at its most extreme: five-year-olds regarded as future ‘human capital’.

The economic functionality of the new curriculum is highly questionable. Not only does it leave little time for problem-solving or creativity, its demands are archaic: overwhelming stress is placed on correct spelling at a ridiculously early age (writing Tuesday and Wednesday correctly at the age of five, possession and business at seven), yet this aspect of writing is rapidly becoming an IT-supported function.

The Arts

The creative arts had been recognised under New Labour in neoliberal terms, not for their cultural value or as personal creativity but to service the culture and media industries. Even this was not understood by the Coalition Government’s policy makers. The English Baccalaureate demanded A*-C grades in a set of traditional academic subjects (English, maths, science, foreign language, and history or geography) but without art, music or drama, let alone media studies.

Certainties

Gove’s new curriculum undermines critical preparation for democratic citizenship and lacks any sense of the need to involve young people in active debate or inquiry or challenge. Knowledge is something to be served up on a plate, delivered, transmitted, or, in Freire’s metaphor, education as ‘banking’. All sense of process has disappeared by packing excessive content into each school year and imposing concepts without a thought process onto younger and younger children. The ultimate irony of Gove’s PISA envy is that PISA tests require intellectual process: problem-solving and application of knowledge rather than the regurgitation of a series of facts.

This avoidance of uncertainty is interesting ideologically. It is clearly part of a Conservative ideology which prefers to see the world as fixed and change

as dangerous. It reflects older grammar school pedagogies, or more precisely nostalgic memories. Finally, as the next section shows, a particular view of knowledge or epistemology is at work.

Mind Before Matter

One frequent presumption of Gove's new curriculum is teaching through explicit rules. The explicit assumption is that teachers should announce a rule of grammar, spelling, calculation or nature prior to any activity. Nothing is introduced through participation in a situation or activity, with the teacher providing some guidance part-way through the process. This goes against the social constructivist theory whereby children's engagement with reality is 'mediated' by language and other cultural tools, so that the language, symbols or maps provide a kind of lens or framework to guide perception or activity.

This Cartesian divorce of knowledge from activity and experience is evident in various subjects, but most acutely in literacy. The new curriculum notoriously involves the divorce of phonic decoding from meaning-making and enjoyment of books. A nonsense-words test was even introduced for six year olds. Children's author Mike Rosen satirises this: "In the first year you play Un-Football, by playing without the ball." (Rosen, 2012)

Children from poorer families are less likely to have books to enjoy at home, and now they are denied the pleasure of books at school, learning artificially.

Setting the Hurdles High

Finally, it is important to question the Government's insistence that, at every stage, the hurdles must be set higher. This is presented as promotion of high standards. Elitism is doubtless a factor – the belief that only a minority can or should succeed – but something more could be at stake. After years of politicians trying to maximise the number of pupils who qualify, Gove seems intent on reducing them. This shows up in the National Curriculum, in changes to the GCSE and its grading system, abolition of the Education

Maintenance Allowance for 16-18 year olds in education, and the trebling of university fees to £9000 per year. As Mike Rosen argues:

Capitalism can no longer see a way to employ all the clever well qualified people. In their terms, schools are producing too many students at 18 who are performing well enough to go to university and do a degree, so barriers are put in their way. (2012)

Finding a Way Out

Gove was finally sacked as education minister in July 2014. He had become too unpopular, with elections due within the year. Yet his legacy is oppressive, and there is little sign of clarity from the main opposition party Labour.

Finding a way out of this mess will not be easy. The curriculum has suffered too long from excessive ministerial control and rhetorical appeals around ‘standards’. It has swayed back and forth between neo-conservative nostalgia and neo-liberal utilitarianism. Achievement for the academically more successful has been driven by the pressure to collect the most A*s, regardless of what is being learnt; the ‘less able’ are often judged incapable of anything more than a desiccated version of ‘basic skills’ and an early preparation for routine jobs. There is little focus on personal wellbeing, and any thought of personal identity or engaged citizenship has flown out the window.

So what will it take? The following outlines some general directions.

Orientations and Aims

It is difficult to imagine any future society in which education does not play a part in preparing young people to earn a living or contribute to our collective economic welfare. This should not mean, however, an early specialisation (i.e. at age 14) for a trade for those who will not go to university. All young people need a broad foundation including core skills (literacy, mathematics, ICT etc), scientific and social understanding, and

creative activity of many kinds. They also need abilities of problem-solving and critical interpretation, ethical and aesthetic judgement, which relate both to economic activity and to citizenship.

To become active and critical citizens of a complex and troubled world, characterised by unprecedented global mobility and economic division, all pupils will need to engage individually or collectively with issues of environmental sustainability, poverty, migration, cultural diversity and war. Any new curriculum designed for a democratic society will need to foreground critical thinking, especially in relationship to modern media and genres. This involves fostering a questioning attitude and learning to read texts and ideas ‘against the grain’ from one’s own and other perspectives.

There must be flexibility at the level of individual schools and the communities they serve, but within a common curriculum with an entitlement to all of the above. It cannot continue to be a politicians’ football, kicked between the opposing goals of neoliberal functionalism and neoconservative nostalgia. Nor can the population be divided into ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’.

Accountability and Assessment

Future national policy needs to be based on trusting and supporting teachers rather than on threats and surveillance. It will need a very different sense of the ways in which teachers relate to parents and the wider community – an acute issue for working class communities.

Current notions of accountability were designed to promote competition among schools and individuals. They lead to superficial learning for short-term assessment and grading, rather than intellectual engagement and enduring cognitive development. The current accountability regime has done nothing to reduce the achievement gap, and makes it more difficult for teachers to respond flexibly to less engaged pupils. Indeed, it tends to limit learning in the schools which are subject to most surveillance from inspectors, and which are publicly stigmatised for relatively low achievement. A more discreet kind of monitoring and support is needed, as in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011).

Learners need formative feedback, and also the satisfaction when learning activities lead to a shared product, presentation or performance. Their parents need to know how to help and support, not just their children's place in the pecking order. This is particularly true of working-class families which have less knowledge of higher education and the routes to higher-level careers.

There is a role for final summative assessment, but this should balance written examinations with more authentic forms of assessment such as design projects and investigations.

Age-Appropriate Learning

A century of research into children developing knowledge has taught us how this depends on their personal engagement with the realities they experience, and then reflection on that experience mediated by language and other cultural tools. This involves shifting between different levels of concrete experience and abstract representation (simulations, algebra, maps, narrative, explanation, etc.), applying ideas and skills from the past, collaborating with others, and stepping back to evaluate and re-plan the learning process. Rote learning, memorisation and behaviourist conditioning only work if the curriculum is limited to very simple content.

These social constructivist processes cannot outreach a child's development. Treating young children like battery hens results in alienation, demoralisation and the superficial accumulation of data.

Successful teaching requires reaching out to young people in all their diversity, helping them develop an understanding of their world and experiences, drawing on vernacular knowledge in the local community, and building bridges to high status knowledge. This is a political issue.

Learning Without Limits

Old assumptions continue of an inherited, measurable and fixed intelligence. Myths of fixed intelligence continue to have a profound impact on education practice. One of the forms this takes is the division of children from the age of five into 'ability groups', without questioning what differences of prior

experience create the impression of differences of ‘ability’. Inevitably such divisions reproduce social hierarchies, and limit achievement through lower expectations and a limited curriculum. The way forward is not to promulgate blame or increase pressure but to enrich experience, bridge between vernacular and high status academic knowledge, and combine timely remediation of weak literacy skills with an interesting and challenging curriculum.

Support and Development

New forms of professional development are necessary to support teachers in a more open environment. We can learn lessons from the past (local authority teachers’ centres, advisers and curriculum projects; national projects and teacher networks; collaboration with teachers’ associations and forge new relationships with universities, artists, engineers etc.

The notion of inspirational ‘beacon schools’ needs reviving. However the pressure to produce improved attainment within two or three years, which has marred and shipwrecked many projects in recent decades, must be avoided.

The benefit from teachers collaborating to plan new curriculum units and teacher activities cannot be overemphasised. Teacher-research produces new insights and refines practice.

Some Lessons from Elsewhere

Pedagogies have narrowed in England in recent decades, but there are pockets of good practice. A richer repertoire of teaching methods can also be found in other countries where there has been less bureaucratic control and political domination. These include what I have referred to elsewhere as ‘open architectures’. These pedagogies use a loose or flexible structure which both maintains coherence – a learning community – and gives individuals and groups greater scope for autonomy. A characteristic feature is that key skills (research, statistical interpretation, sociological surveys,

online publication) are applied to rich contexts and problems, and that learning generally leads to a visible product, performance or presentation. Examples include, among others, project method, storyline, collective versions of design and technology, video production, citizens' theatre, online or live simulations, and locally based investigations.

This is particularly important in more deprived working class communities. Poverty causes a loss of self-esteem and a sense of futility since plans rarely materialise (see Smyth & Wrigley, 2013). Such pedagogies both raise self-esteem and provide strong satisfaction when goals are visibly reached and shown to parents and the community.

Although more difficult to 'measure', such pedagogical forms are more likely to lead to high achievement in terms of the various aims of education, whether a preparation to contribute to the economy and social wellbeing, personal and cultural development, or democratic global citizenship.

References

- Aldrich, R. (1988). The national curriculum: an historical perspective. In D. Lawton & C. Chitty (eds), *The National Curriculum*. Bedford Way Papers n° 33 (pp. 21-33). London: Institute of Education University of London.
- Apple, M. (2000). *Official knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Ball, S. (1990). *Politics and policy making in education*. London: Routledge.
- Ball, S. (1993). Education, Majorism and the 'Curriculum of the Dead'. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 1*(2), 195-214. doi: [10.1080/0965975930010202](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965975930010202)
- Ball, S. (2008). *The education debate*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Barnes, D. (1976). *From communication to curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Brecht, B. (1935). *Questions from a worker who reads*. Retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/brecht/>

- Bullock Report (1975). *A language for life*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office
- Gibbons, S. (2014). *The London Association for the Teaching of English 1947-67*. London: Institute of Education.
- Gove, M. (2010, October). *All pupils will learn our island story*. Conference speech. Retrieved from <http://toryspeeches.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/michael-gove-all-pupils-will-learn-our-island-story.pdf>
- Graddol, D. et al. (eds) (1991). *Talk and learning 5-16: an inservice pack on oracy for teachers*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Haydn, T. (2004). History. In, J. White. (ed), *Rethinking the school curriculum: values, aims and purposes* (pp. 87-103). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Hilton, M. (2001). Are the Key Stage Two reading tests becoming easier each year?. *Reading*, 35(1), 4-11. doi: 10.1111/1467-9345.00153
- Hoggart, R. (1957). *The uses of literacy*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- House, R. (ed.) (2011). *Too much, too soon? Early learning and the erosion of childhood*. Stroud: Hawthorn Press.
- Hundred Academics (2013, 19 May). Too much too young: open letter. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/100-academics-savage-education-secretary-michael-gove-for-conveyorbelt-curriculum-for-schools-8541262.html>
- Jenkins, E. (2004). Science. In, J. White (ed), *Rethinking the school curriculum: values, aims and purposes* (pp. 165-178). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Jones, K. (2003). *Education in Britain – 1944 to the present*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lawson, J. & Silver, H. (1973). *A social history of education in England*. London: Methuen.

- Phillips, R. (1998). *History teaching, nationhood and the state: a study in educational politics*. London: Cassell.
- Plowden Report (1967). *Children and their primary schools: a report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office .
- Primary Charter (2013). *The new National Curriculum – damaging children and education Powerpoint with accompanying notes*. Retrieved from <http://primarycharter.wordpress.com>
- Rosen, H. (1972). *Language and class: A critical look at the theories of Basil Bernstein*. Bristol: Falling Wall.
- Rosen, M. (2012, September 2). *Dear Mr Gove* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://swpradiocast.bandcamp.com/track/dear-mr-gove-marxism-2012>
- Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: what can the world learn from education change in Finland?*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schama, S. (2013, May 30). *Our children, our history* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.hayfestival.com/p-6108-simon-schama-and-teachers.aspx>
- Smyth, J. & Wrigley, T. (2013). *Living on the edge: rethinking poverty, class and schooling*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Stenhouse, L. (1971). The humanities curriculum project: the rationale. *Theory Into Practice*, 10(3), pp.154-162. doi: [10.1080/00405847109542322](https://doi.org/10.1080/00405847109542322)
- Thatcher, M. (1987). Speech at Conservative Party Conference. Retrieved from <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106941>
- The Norwood Report (1943). *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools*. London: HM Stationery Office. Retrieved from <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/norwood/norwood1943.html>

Tomlinson, S. (2005). *Education in a post-welfare society*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Tropp, A. (1957). *The school teachers: The growth of the teaching profession in England and Wales from 1800 to the present day*. London: Heinemann.

Williams, R. (1985). *The country and the city*. London: Hogarth.

Wrigley, T. (2006). *Another school is possible*. London: Bookmarks.

Wrigley, T. & Kalambouka, A. (2012). *Academies and achievement: setting the record straight*. Changing Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.changingschools.org.uk/academiesfolder/complete%20report.pdf>

Yandell, J. (2013). Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment: of rigour and unfinished revolutions. In, M. Allen & P. Ainley (eds), *Education beyond the Coalition: reclaiming the agenda* (pp. 5-23). Retrieved from <http://radicaledbks.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/john-yandell-pedagogy.pdf>

Author: Prof. Dr. Terry Wrigley. Visiting Professor, Leeds Metropolitan University, England. Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Federation University, Australia Leeds Beckett University.

Contact Address: Leeds Beckett University, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK.
terrywrigley@gmail.com