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Education Reform in Great Britain

Introduction

In the comparative literature of education, the British system is normally distinguished by two features. First it is customarily observed that the system is centrally governed but locally administered. Second, attention is drawn to the autonomy of the headteacher who is characterized as king or queen of the castle. These two stereotypes imply a low level of curriculum control either by local authority or by central government and a relatively high degree of initiative within the individual school. True though these stereotypes may have been in their day, they have been given the lie by reforms enacted within the last fifteen years.

The changes which are documented in this paper and which are now being implemented in England and Wales were legislated within the Education Reform Act of 1988. This Act was the culmination of several years of debate and decision in which schools and the teaching profession had become increasingly more accountable to outsiders such as politicians. It should be noted that in matters of education Scotland has its own system and is not implied in all the detailed reforms discussed in this paper.

Indeed, it was a politician who inaugurated what subsequently became known as the Great Debate in education. In October 1976 James Callaghan made a major speech at Ruskin College which is reckoned to have been an unprecedented intervention by a British prime minister in the matter of education. The speech picked up current concerns about educational achievement and introduced questions regarding lay involvement in the control of the curriculum. The education of children, it was contended, was much too important a matter to be left to the teachers. The effect of the speech was to establish education as a central political issue and it has featured prominently in every subsequent General Election.

At the time of the Ruskin College speech there was in the pipeline a major report on the government of schools. The Taylor report which appeared the following year recommended greater parental involvement on the governing bodies of schools and the appropriate legislation was enacted in 1980. Parent power burgeoned throughout the 1980s; at the same time, central government enlarged its powers in education, largely by diminishing those of the local authority. There were, then, both centralizing and devolutionary trends and the victim of both was the intermediate sector, the local authority.

The 1988 Education Reform Act

The law which came into force in 1988 and is still in the process of being implemented represents the most systematic reform of British education since 1944; to the extent that it legislates not only for the provision and management of schools but also in an unprecedented way in matters of the curriculum, it may even be regarded as the most systematic ever. Perhaps the most significant impact of the Education Reform Act — and certainly that which has enjoyed the greatest exposure — has been its introduction of a National Curriculum to ensure that all children follow a common core of basic subjects. The Act provided for a scheme of testing children at the terminal points of 'key stages' in their school careers. In a number of ways the Act dislodged the local education authority from its previously key role in educational administration and delivery. With the trend toward the local management of schools, some responsibilities for finance and the appointment of teachers have passed from the local authority to the school. The option of funding schools not as previously from the resources of the local authority but by means of a government grant has enabled schools to by-pass local authority control, if only to place themselves under the control of central government: what is described in the Act as 'the acquisition of grant-maintained status' is popularly known as 'opting out' which suggests that the option is perceived as a step in the direction of domestic autonomy. A further shift from local to central provision has been secured by the introduction of a new type of secondary school, the city technology college, which usurps part of the local authority's responsibility to provide school places for all its children.

The National Curriculum

Until 1988 the only compulsory subject in British schools was Religious Education. In practice every school would have offered English (or Welsh) and mathematics and Physical Education but they were not required by law. Without the protection of the law and in the circumstances of teacher shortage, some important subjects such as science were not receiving sufficient attention. Even with the law on its side, Religious Education had widely lapsed or was being loosely interpreted.

These observed variations in provision and practice and the perceived need to ensure a balanced education for all children linked with other concerns. Politicians mindful of a link between the economy and the educational system drew lessons from the practice of successful competitors in the world market, such as Japan. Although Napoleon was not mentioned by name except by critics of the 1988

Act, some advantage was seen in the uniformity of the French system in which it was possible for children to move from one school to another without gaps or repetition in the programme of studies.

The principle of the National Curriculum, therefore, is the extension of the legal requirement to cover a balanced range of subjects. At the heart of these are the 'core' subjects English, mathematics and science which are given more hours than other subjects. The seven 'foundation' subjects of the National Curriculum are history, geography, physical education, art, music, technology and a modern language. Welsh may be included either as a fourth core subject or as an eighth foundation subject. Religious Education remains compulsory and has enjoyed some enhancement of status since 1988 but it is not a foundation subject and is not as yet governed by such requirements as the need to assess. The modern language is not at present a requirement in primary schools.

Between and across these subjects a number of cross-curricular elements have been identified in the form of dimensions, themes and skills. These include multicultural education, issues relating to equality of opportunity, health education, communication skills and so on. An interesting example of a 'theme' is education for citizenship and there are guidelines for work at each stage of a child's education: the components of this theme are the community, pluralist society, being a citizen, the family, democracy in action, the citizen and the law, work, employment and leisure and public services. For some tastes, the emphasis is rather more upon responsibilities than upon rights and to that extent it reflects the prevailing mood of the times.

A major part and purpose of the National Curriculum is its provision of a comprehensive system of assessment. The compulsory years of schooling — currently five to sixteen — are divided into four 'key stages', terminating at ages seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen. For each of the National Curriculum subjects there are 'attainment targets', each defined in terms of ten 'levels of attainment' which reflect differences in attainment and in progress according to age. The most widely observed indicators, however, are the results collected from 'standard achievement tasks' (SATs): these are externally devised tasks which were intended to have the purpose of complementing teachers' assessments and cross-checking these on a national basis (Schools Examinations and Assessment Council 1990:85). However, when the first results of SATs in core subjects were published in late 1991 they were immediately interpreted to reveal variations in pupil performance and teacher effectiveness rather than variable criteria of assessment. Statistics were computed for each local authority and attention was drawn to those Conservative authorities which came top of the inevitable league and those Labour authorities which came bottom.

The elimination of the local authority

The effect of educational reforms in recent years has been to reduce greatly the authority operating at local level. The rights given to parents in the choice of schools, the delegation of finance and aspects of appointments to the schools and the vociferousness of central government in the curriculum debate have all reduced the power of the local authority. Government initiatives have increasingly bypassed the local authority: grants have been offered direct from centre to encourage particular developments in schools such as the acquisition of computers or the extension of links with the world of work. Again, schools have the option to 'opt-out' of local authority control and to seek funding by means of a government grant.

The results of SATs mentioned above which are classified to reflect poorly upon certain local authorities are the latest ammunition in a continuing propaganda war between central and local government. In the past much has been made of the educational policies of some left-wing authorities such as the London boroughs of Brent and Haringey whose recommendations on teaching about race and sexuality were exposed in the popular press: for example, teachers were urged not to misuse the word 'black' and the familiar children's nursery rhyme was rewritten as 'Baa baa green sheep'.

The conflict between central and local levels is not confined to education, however. It is a more general issue having to do with the control of spending and the nature of provision of a wide range of services.

Parent power

As explained above, the Ruskin College speech was delivered at a time when there were already proposals for the greater involvement of parents in the government of schools. Provision was made for this in the 1980 Education Act, which also granted parents rights in the choice of their children's schools. In order to inform this choice schools were required to publish such information about themselves as the Secretary of State should require. In due course they were required to publish examination results and inspectors' reports: the first of these was consonant with a trend toward accountability, the second with that toward the enhancement of central authority. Under the 1986 Act there was provision for an annual parents' meeting to which governors could invite teachers but which they had no automatic right to attend. In the event not many parents have exercised their own rights to attend either and the annual parents' meeting has not proven as potent a check upon professional autonomy. The right of parents to withdraw children from Religious Edu-

cation has also been extended in law and in practice: parents may withhold their children from sex education; a religious sect called Exclusive Brethren has recently pronounced computers to be the inventions of the Devil and will not allow its children to come in contact with such things.

But the greater influence of parents is a less formal one. What parents want from education matters a great deal more in a situation of falling school rolls when schools must adjust their styles in order to appeal to potential clients. Market forces come into play and professional judgement is displaced by popular taste. Public opinion is then led by politicians who are dismissive of experts in education and who articulate what purports to be a no-nonsense point of view. Schools need both children and funding to stay in business and they therefore ignore lay opinion at their peril.

Styles and standards

A persistent theme of educational debate in Britain in recent years has been the possibility of a relationship between teaching and learning styles and academic achievement. 'Traditional' classroom methods have been characterized by the secure authority of the teacher and the prominence of textbooks, the presentation of content as discrete subjects, a formal and didactic style of teaching, the organization of children as a whole class, an emphasis upon the acquisition of factual knowledge and the periodic use of tests. On the other hand, 'progressive' methods are distinguished by a relatively high level of pupil autonomy and pupil interaction in learning, the organization of children as small groups with the implicit purpose of cooperation between learners, the integration of subject matter and the avoidance of intrusive forms of testing. Whether rightly or wrongly, traditional methods have long been associated with discipline both in learning and in the control of behaviour. To that extent, they have been favoured by the conservative lobby which in the 1960s and 1970s published a series of pamphlets known as the *Black Papers in Education* and which renewed its campaign in the late 1980s through the publications of a small number of conservative intellectuals known as the Hillgate Group. In respect of higher education the concern for standards has been related to the issue of political bias.

The standards debate derived some momentum from the Ruskin College speech in 1976:

I am concerned in my journeys to find complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required.

In the following year, much publicity surrounded the release of a

report *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* by Neville Bennett, which was interpreted by Black Papers enthusiasts to substantiate their fears. Bennett had conducted observations in a large number of classrooms which he grouped more or less according to the stereotypes of traditional and progressive style set out above. He then conducted tests in English language and mathematics and published results to show that overall the greater progress had been made by children in formally taught classes. Bennett has recently said that his work was rushed into print by an enthusiastic publisher who saw that it would catch the mood of the time and he has recognized some imperfections caused in the haste. Nonetheless, the Bennett report had the effect of giving the opponents of progressive methods a notionally scientific evidence in support of their position.

In the autumn of 1991 the issue of methods surfaced again at the level of government with Prime Minister and Party Chairman pledging to the Conservative Party conference that teaching methods were next on the agenda of educational reforms:

We stand for better schools with an end to those Voodoo methods that have blighted the chances of a generation of schoolchildren (Chris Patten 11 October 1991).

The progressive theorists, Mr President, have had their say and they have had their day (John Major 11 October 1991).

The trend which these comments celebrate is the gradual displacement of the intellectual and research contribution to the formulation of educational policy; it is succeeded by the appeal of politicians to a down-to-earth and common sense view in which they are fortified by the selective publication of the findings of government sponsored enquiries. Such an enquiry into the teaching methods used in primary schools and their effectiveness in the context of the National Curriculum was announced in December 1991. However, the suppression of earlier research findings which were not supportive of policy intentions has inclined some to believe that educational reformers are not open to significant but inconvenient research findings. The Secretary of State appointed a university professor, the chief inspector of schools and the chief executive of the National Curriculum Council to report within a matter of weeks. He insisted that the commission was "independent" and that "their experience of primary education and knowledge of the curriculum will command respect" (Clarke 1991). At the same time there were clear messages about what findings would be welcome. He cited a report by Her Majesty's Inspectors on French primary schools to show that 'formal, whole-class teaching works' and he challenged the organization of the class into

groups working on differentiated activities and questioned the effectiveness of topic work.

Conclusion

The burden and pace of change has fallen heavily upon the teachers. The organization of the National Curriculum, training in assessment procedures, the communication of assessments to parents, the local management of schools especially in financial aspects and the continual need to respond quickly to new guidelines has called for an extraordinary stamina and flexibility. In return there has been little to enhance professional self-respect. Successive Secretaries of State have demanded more but offered nothing proportionate in terms of financial reward. Local management, while attractive as a dimension of self-government has in practice been meanly resourced and has been too often more of a burden than a blessing. In consequence, teacher morale is low in many schools and stress is a sign of the times. The government has been compelled to withdraw some changes such as elements of testing in the early key stages. It now remains to be seen how compliant the teaching profession will be in the face of a government assault upon its favoured classroom methods.

References

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Current Research

Sven-Johan Spånberg of Uppsala is conducting a project entitled "The Weak Male and his Image of Woman". The project falls within the theoretical framework of Gender Criticism, drawing on historical and psycho-analytical method. Specifically, Spånberg is investigating the male role in late Victorian poetry, concentrating on the discrepancy between ideal and reality, as seen for instance in the contrast between the Arthur figure in Tennyson's poetry and characters based on the Wagnerian Tannhäuser figure in the works of e.g. Morris, Swinburne, Wilde. Address: Sven-Johan Spånberg, Department of English, University of Uppsala, Box 513, S-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden.

The research project "Male and Female Terms in English: A Diachronic Study of a Semantic Field", run jointly by the English Departments of Uppsala and Umeå, was started in 1990. The purpose of this sociolinguistic project is to study terms for men and women in their various social and sexual roles, relating changes in the naming of human beings to changing socio-economic factors. Addresses: Mats Rydén, Department of English, University of Uppsala, Box 513, S-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden; Gunnar Persson, Department of English, University of Umeå, S-901 87 Umeå, Sweden.

JOHN KIRKMAN

Which English Should We Teach for Scientific and Technical Communication?

John Kirkman var tidigare *Director* för enheten för kommunikationsstudier vid University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology i Cardiff. Numera driver han ett konsultföretag inom området vetenskaplig och teknisk kommunikation. I den här artikeln diskuterar han vikten av stilistisk och kommunikativ medvetenhet i samband med undervisning i fackspråklig engelska.

My main job is to help engineers and scientists learn to speak and write effectively. The emphasis in my courses is on the professional tasks that confront people from day to day in commerce, research, or industrial production. Much of the time, I work outside the UK, in companies, research centres, and educational institutions where English is a foreign or second language; but English is a primary working medium for the people I teach. As I plan my courses for those people, I am faced with the question "WHICH English should I teach for effective communication in scientific and technical contexts?"

"Typical" technical English or "good" technical English?

When I ask myself "WHICH English?", I am not concerned to establish a list of functions or situations on which to base my syllabus and my teaching strategy. Certainly, there comes a time at which I have to consider what forms of language will be needed for "making requests", or what will be the best way to describe an instrument in order to obtain Customs clearance for temporary export of that instrument; but my prior concern is to answer the question: should I teach a special, heavy, passive style of technical writing, typical of much of the expression in professional journals, or should I teach a readable, natural style of expression, such as is used in serious day-to-day communication?

This is a real issue. My classes want to learn how to speak and write "good" English. Professional scientists and engineers know that the credibility and esteem accorded to them *as scientists and engineers* are influenced by the quality of their communication skills. They know that much scientific and technical communication is clumsy and difficult to assimilate. They recognise this both in their own languages and in English. They want to learn to imitate the "best" models of scientific and technical expression, not just "typical" or "average" ways of speaking or writing.