

# The Exclusive Pursuit of Social Inclusion

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**ABSTRACT** Despite its best intentions, social exclusion has grown rather than diminished under New Labour's education policies. In order to understand this Ivor Goodson argues that we need to engage with the history of the formal curriculum and the long and continuing fight over what counts as proper knowledge. Taking science and environmental science as his examples he reveals a shameful story of intellectual and social prejudice that remains immovably with us today. Commitment to social inclusion that ignores the exclusionary nature of the curriculum we are required to teach will, inevitably and ironically, defeat attempts to undertake deep reform of a profoundly unjust and in some respects intellectually dishonest system of education.

Since the election of a 'New Labour' government in 1997 avowedly determined to prioritise 'education, education, education' there has been a concern to broaden social-inclusion. Given the well established (and well-defended) patterns of social inequality in Britain, this was never going to be an easy task. But recent pronouncements from the Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, have begun to concede just how substantial the failure to broaden social inclusion has been. It would seem new Labour policies have in fact worked not to broaden social inclusion but the deepen social exclusion. Speaking on the 26 July 2005 to the New Labour think-tank, the Institute of Public Policy Research, she said

The gap between rich and poor in national curriculum test results and admissions to universities has grown. We must treat seriously the possibility that – despite all our efforts – who your parents are still affects attainment as much in 2004 as it did in 1998.[1]

The key phrase in this statement is the phrase 'despite all our efforts'. Looking at the report again should raise our suspicions. While she admits that 'who your parents are still affects attainment as much in 2004 as it did in 1998', her data actually shows rather that new Labour policies have worked to increase not modify the gap between rich and poor in educational attainment. Not so much a result 'despite all our efforts' but a result quite possibly 'because of all our efforts'. The data shows that new Labour policies are not working towards social inclusion but actually furthering social exclusion.

### **Bad Consequences of Ill-conceived Good Intentions**

Now a cynical reading of New Labour policies might argue that this government has been following a policy of fine-tuning social exclusion by stealth. I do not take this view. Rather I suspect we have a government with broadly good intentions that approaches the task of social inclusion as a Christian and philanthropic duty. The educational background of the major players in government and their advisers and civil servants pre-dispose them to believe in social inclusion as a process of distributing elite educational categories more widely. They forget that as members of the elite their educational experiences were founded on the social exclusions of others. What counted as education for them was designed for the few at the price of exclusion for the many.

As a result they have quite possibly unknowingly employed educational strategies built around well established foundations of exclusion to try to deliver social inclusion. This is not as illogical as an informed educational research reading might imply. Most of us equate 'education' with our own educational experiences and we accept as 'givens' basic educational phenomena such as 'traditional' school subjects or 'academic' examinations. These are part of the widely accepted 'grammar of schooling'. A layman's view would be that since 'these things equal good schooling, let's try and include more pupils in this kind of educational experience and thereby we will deliver social inclusion'. Seems like common sense and certainly this was the way new Labour proceeded. In fact the truth is far more complex and contradictory. We need to understand a little of the history of schooling to see why New Labour rushed so far and fast up an exclusionary cul-de-sac in pursuit of social inclusion.

To outline a section on the history of schooling I want to draw on the studies I have been undertaking for the last thirty or so years. They too have attempted to answer the question as to why social inclusion and 'fair education for all' seems so perennially elusive. Broadly what these studies show is that many of the traditional building blocks of schooling are themselves devices for social exclusion not inclusion. Let me take as an example that unproblematic 'given' in every school the 'traditional school subject'.

### **Exclusive Pursuits: the invention of school subjects**

To begin with let me take an episode in the invention of one school subject: science. I choose this example to show the relationship between school subject knowledge which is accepted and becomes therefore 'traditional' and subject knowledge which is disallowed. This is the interface between school knowledge and powerful interest groups in society. School subjects are defined not in a disinterested scholastic way but in close relationship to the power and interests of social groups. The more powerful the social group the more likely they are to exercise power over school knowledge.

In his book *Science for the People*, David Layton describes a movement in the initial development of the school science curriculum called the 'Science of

Common Things'.<sup>[2]</sup> This was an early attempt to broaden social inclusion through relating the science curriculum to ordinary pupils' experience of the natural world, of their homes, daily lives and work. This curriculum was delivered in the elementary schools set up for predominantly working class clientele. There is clear evidence provided by Layton and in contemporary government reports that the Science of Common Things worked successfully in classrooms and extended science education. A successful strategy for social inclusion in school knowledge was therefore put in place.

We would however be wrong to assume that this was seen as a desirable development. Far from it. Other definitions of school science were being advocated. Lord Wrottesley chaired a Parliamentary Committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science on the most appropriate type of science education for the upper classes. David Hudson argues that the report 'reflected a growing awareness of a serious problem: that science education at the elementary level was proving highly successful, particularly as far as the development of thinking skills was concerned, and the social hierarchy was under threat because there was not corresponding development for the higher orders' <sup>[3]</sup> Lord Wrottesley's fears were clearly stated as regards moves to further social inclusion:

... a poor boy hobbled forth to give a reply; he was lame and humpbacked, and his wan, emaciated face told only too clearly the tale of poverty and its consequences ... but he gave forthwith so lucid and intelligent a reply to the question put to him that there arose a feeling of admiration for the child's talents combined with a sense of shame that more information should be found in some of the lowest of our lowest classes on matters of general interest than those far above them in the world by station.

Wrottesley concluded:

It would be an unwholesome and vicious state of society in which those who are comparatively unblessed with nature's gifts should be generally superior in intellectual attainments to those above them in station.<sup>[4]</sup>

Soon after Wrottesley's comments in 1860, science was removed from the elementary curriculum. When science eventually reappeared in the curriculum of elementary schools some twenty years later it was in a very different form from the Science of Common Things. A watered-down version of pure laboratory science had become accepted as the correct and 'traditional' view of science, a view which has persisted largely unchallenged to the present day. School subjects, it seems, have to develop a form acceptable to the 'higher orders' of society – being a mechanism for social inclusion naturally does not recommend itself to the higher orders whose very position depends on social exclusion. School subjects there after become in themselves not only 'accepted', 'given', 'traditional', inevitable but also in their academic form exclusionary devices.

## New Subjects, Old Hierarchies

Fast forwarding a century or more I began to study a new subject 'environmental studies', not unlike the Science of Common Things, in that it grew from its origins as a working class inclusionary subject to begin to claim the status of 'a proper subject'. In the book, *School Subjects and Curriculum Change* I show how this new subject, highly suited to comprehensive schools and with real inclusionary potential, was systematically blocked from becoming a broad-based A level 'academic' subject.[5] In Britain only a subject accepted as 'academic' can be resourced as a high status 'proper subject'.

This position of hierarchy for 'academic' subjects in fact represented a history of subjects linking to social hierarchy and social exclusion. The dominance of academic subjects goes back to the battle over which subjects should be prioritised in the new secondary schools at the start of the twentieth century. In 1904 Morants Secondary Regulations handed victory to the public school cum grammar school vision of education and school subjects. Hence the academic subject was built on a clear foundation of social exclusion for such schools never catered for more than 20% of pupils. In effect the 'bottom' 80% were sacrificed and the top 20% promoted by the prioritisation of the 'academic tradition'. A contemporary noted of the 1904 Regulations that the academic subject-centred curriculum was 'subordinated to that literary instruction which makes for academic culture, but is of no practical utility to the classes for whom the local authorities should principally cater'.

In the comprehensive schools whilst new curriculum initiatives developed new subject categories such as environmental studies, but also community studies, urban studies, womens studies and social studies, the stranglehold of the academic tradition remained. This effectively blocked other traditions in subjects which stressed those vocational and pedagogic traditions likely to promote social inclusion. The very process of becoming a school subject therefore purges subject knowledge of its inclusionary characteristics. Layton shows this exclusionary effect with his evolutionary profile of the traditional subject. In the first stage.

The callow intruder stakes a place in the timetable, justifying its presence on grounds such as pertinence and utility. During this stage learners are attracted to the subject because of its bearing on matters of concern to them. The teachers are rarely trained specialists, but bring the missionary enthusiasms of pioneers to their task. The dominant criterion is relevance to the needs and interests of the learners.

In the interim second stage:

A tradition of scholarly work in the subject is emerging along with a corps of trained specialists from which teachers may be recruited. Students are still attracted to the Study, but as much by its reputation and growing academic status as by its relevance to their own

problems and concerns. The internal logic and discipline of the subject is becoming increasingly influential in the selection and organisation of subject matter.

In the final stage:

The teachers now constitute a professional body with established rules and values. The selection of subject matter is determined in large measure by the judgements and practices of the specialist scholars who lead inquiries in the field. Students are initiated into a tradition, their attitudes approaching passivity and resignation, a prelude to disenchantment.[6]

The central place of 'academic' subjects is ensconced in our secondary schools, so therefore is an in-built pattern of social prioritising and exclusion. The process outlined above shows clearly that school subject groups tend to move progressively away from social relevance or vocational emphasis. High status in the secondary school tends to focus on abstract theoretical knowledge divorced from the workaday world or the everyday world of the learner. To these high status academic subjects go the main resources in our school systems: the better qualified teachers, the favourable sixth form ratios and the pupil deemed most able. The link is now strengthened by New Labour initiatives in terms of targets, tests and league tables. In this way a pattern of social prioritising built on exclusive pursuits found itself at the heart of a programme of social inclusion. Such a central contradiction and a range of other exclusionary devices inherited unknowingly or unthinkingly, have contributed to the abject failure of New Labour policies to further social inclusion. It is urgently to be hoped that the next time policies are formulated relevant educational research in the area will at least be consulted and considered.

### **Conclusion**

The underpinning prioritisation of academic school subjects effectively strangled new attempts to develop a more inclusive curriculum in comprehensive schools. This pattern of social prioritising was finally consolidated in the new 'National Curriculum' of 1988 which almost exactly re-established Morant's Secondary Regulations of 1904 – The Public School and Grammar School Curriculum was firmly re-instated. A pattern of subject knowledge based on selective exclusion became the lynchpin of the curricula to be offered in comprehensive schools.

Into this stratified and exclusionary terrain came the New Labour government preaching social inclusion and missionary morality. Their focus was on tightening up delivery on targets, tests and tables. But they never even questioned the exclusionary foundations on which their policies were to be built. In Britain there were the leading researchers in the world on the history of school subjects and on the patterns described above. Not one of these

researchers was ever consulted by the government. They pursued social inclusion employing a wide range of well-honed exclusionary devices. The results were precisely as Ruth Kelly recorded – the pronouncements in favour of social inclusion produced results that further extended social exclusion. Tony Blair of Fettes College and Durham Cathedral and his offspring at the Oratory School should take a moment to listen to an earlier Labour leader often pilloried because he stood firm on his principles and understood the complexity of the task of pursuing social inclusion in the face of elite opposition:

We are not here in the world to find elegant solutions, pregnant with initiative, or to serve the ways and modes of profitable progress. No we are here to provide for all those who are weaker and hungrier, more battered and crippled than ourselves. That is our only certain good and great purpose on earth, and if you ask me about those economic problems that may arise if the top is deprived of their initiatives I would answer 'to hell with them. The top is greedy and mean and will always find a way to take care of themselves. They always do'. [7]

Certainly under New Labour education policies the top have done well and the bottom have suffered. It is not a legacy in which any of us can take pride.

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### **Notes**

- [1] Game, R. (2005) Education Reforms Aid the Better Off, *The Independent*, 27 July, p. 17.
- [2] Layton, D. (1973) *Science for the People*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- [3] Hudson, D. (1987) Science Curricula Change in Victorian England: a case study of the science of common things, in I.F. Goodson (Ed.) *International Perspectives in Curriculum History*, p. 36. London: Croom Helm.
- [4] Ibid pp. 36-37.
- [5] Goodson, I.F. (1993) *School Subjects and Curriculum Change*, 3rd Edn. London: Falmer Press.
- [6] Layton, D. (1972) Science as General Education, *Trends in Education*. London: HMSO.
- [7] Foot, M. (2001) Best Foot Goes Ever Forward, *The Observer*, March 4.