
Social and Political Education in British Schools: 50 years of curriculum development

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ABSTRACT The main developments in this broad curriculum area are traced decade by decade with key signpost successes highlighted, along with examples of retrenchment and opposition to the march of progress. The drivers for change and regression were often central government initiatives but, all along, the activity of progressive educationists/academics and teachers in comprehensive schools and their lobbying through professional subject organisations occupied a key role. The possible turning back of the clock under the Coalition's Review of the National Curriculum signals yet another downturn in the fortunes of social and political education.

A Personal Introduction: the 1960s

In the mid 1960s, just finishing my university degree in the social sciences, I formed the view that British schoolchildren were badly served in terms of their social and political education in schools – in fact there wasn't any, or very little. After completing a PGCE course, where I was given the chance to read and research books and articles back to the nineteenth century – on civics, citizenship, history and geography – it became clear that, historically, curricular provision in this broad area was fragmented and weakly conceptualised. In the later 1960s, a few of us, teachers and lecturers (me, Denis Lawton and others), got together in a University of London Institute of Education house off Tavistock Square, and set up the Association for the Teaching of the Social Sciences (ATSS) in order to promote the teaching of the social sciences in schools as a way of bringing a new range of tools, perspectives and subject-matter to children's learning about society. In the USA, in several states, this was already happening with somewhat over-structured schemes and MACOS (*Man: a course of study*). For four years, at a secondary modern school in High Wycombe, I developed, with teacher colleagues there, an innovative humanities and social science curriculum that included some elements and material from the various social sciences. As a result of this work, I was appointed in 1970 by

Brian Simon to the University of Leicester School of Education to set up a Social Science PGCE course to prepare social scientists to teach in schools. This gave me a university base for research, writing, collaboration, lobbying and curriculum development in various manifestations of social and political education and I have devoted most of my career and writing to this, but always working with progressive teachers, academics, subject organisations and social movements.

The 1970s and 1980s: subject consolidation and integrated approaches

In 1973, Denis Lawton and I published a 500-page handbook supporting social science subjects in schools along with more topic-based teaching in various teaching frameworks such as integrated studies, history, geography and other areas (Lawton & Dufour, 1973, 1976). It was both a theoretical work and a guide to teaching ideas and resources. It went into a second edition. We borrowed our title and name for the general curriculum trends – the new social studies – from an American book that analysed similar developments in the USA. Of the British context, we said:

Our view is that the new social studies may be organized in many different ways, but that they should be available for all pupils from the least able to the most able, and that one of the problems is to devise courses which are relevant to all ... but also capable of maintaining the interest of pupils wishing to go much further.
(Lawton & Dufour, 1973, p. x)

In terms of the broad social curriculum, there were three major strands opening up in these decades. One of them was the growth in provision of social science subjects for GCE O and A Level including Sociology, Economics, Politics and Psychology. More exam boards were offering these courses and student numbers were increasing, as were the professional subject organisations to support them – the ATSS, the Economics Association, the Politics Association and the APT (Association of Psychology Teachers). These organisations, largely teacher-led, were vital in this growth, providing a complete framework and architecture of support, linking examiners, textbook and resource writers, and general initiatives in continuing professional development. I later published an overview of the extensive progress these and related subjects had made in schools (Dufour, 1982).

The second trend was that comprehensive schools, especially in London and Leicestershire, were also developing topic-based integrated humanities courses for 11-12-year-olds and for 14-16-year-olds. These were invariably mixed-ability, resource-based courses dealing with merged historical and geographical themes for the young ones and key social themes for the older ones, although there was a tendency for the courses for the older pupils to be for so-called lower ability bands and often constructed around somewhat

miserabilist topics – abortion, suicide and the Bomb. For the 14-16-year-olds, these could be tailor-made courses under the different CSE modes that later disappeared when the GCSE was introduced in 1988, thus ending some quite innovative and original teaching and learning. Visiting schools, I mainly witnessed lively and engaging courses, with pupils learning about and debating a range of key social issues. Academic educationists, such as Douglas Holly (1973) and the Humanities Association, were also providing teacher education and a national support network for continuing professional development (CPD).

The third and quite exciting trend for those teachers more interested in a less-subject-oriented, more socially-focused and liberating curriculum, was the growing popularity of single-issue subjects or discourses, increasingly referred to as ‘cross-curricular issues’ or ‘themes’. These included vocational education/careers, personal, social and health education (PSHE), development and global education, environmental education, human rights education, multicultural and anti-racist education as well as other areas, including citizenship. Since there was no National Curriculum, these approaches to social and political education could flourish in innovative schools and LEAs, taken up by forward-looking teachers who saw the need for them in relation to providing a worthwhile broader education and in response to changes in society. Many of these curricular areas were responding to major social movements and pressure groups in the wider society beyond the school, such as the peace movement, the human rights movement, movements for ethnic and gender equality, and the global development and environmental movements. I bagged them as ‘the new social curriculum’ in a compilation of essays and comment in 1990, observing that:

Most of the themes are seen as growing out of major social movements and campaigns from the grassroots, rather than arising from government initiatives, and they have stimulated the interest of teachers and young people. (Dufour, 1990, p. xiii)

During these two decades, both Labour and Conservative governments did not dramatically or successfully interfere with, prevent or encourage these major developments in the social and political curriculum of schools, although Prime Minister Callaghan’s ‘Great Debate’ Ruskin speech of October 1976 did suggest chill winds ahead with the hint of more government direction in the curriculum in future and a more utilitarian focus on the economic needs and skill requirements of the nation. But government control of the school curriculum did not come about till the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s.

The 1990s: the National Curriculum versus social and political education

The notorious 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) imposed a National Curriculum on all schools (except private schools) that began to be implemented

in 1990, with the effect of closing down a substantial element of the progress in social and political education that had been made since the 1960s. The Act spectacularly ignored the single-subject social sciences that had developed for 14-16-year-olds, probably because it was assumed that these were option subjects and, unlike History and Geography, not to be imposed on all pupils of this age. It also had no place for integrated or modular courses in humanities so these largely died out. There was also no role for vocational education in spite of regular pronouncements from Labour and Conservative sources about the need for better work-related learning in schools and, in spite of the fact that under Mrs Thatcher's leadership around £1 billion had been spent on vocational education, its prestige was not sufficient to win it inclusion in the National Curriculum core and foundation subjects.

But this grammar school-style curriculum and the subjects that constituted it were characterised by Richard Aldrich as mainly the same as the 1904 curriculum (Aldrich, 1996). It was at least positive that History and Geography were both included as the main compulsory humanities subjects but they were designed in such a way that they could not be integrated or diversified, in the manner of the integrated humanities courses that were popular in many schools, especially for the 11-12-year-olds. And the content, in any case, was prescriptive, later policed, in the 1990s, by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) who would check for 'compliance'. Furthermore, the importance of History and Geography did not last for long – the 1994 Dearing Review (Dearing, 1994) removed the statutory requirement for 14-16-year-olds to study them – thus understandably infuriating the History and Geography subject associations.

The Conservative Government, however, did realise that the single-issue subjects and discourses were an important part of a modern education, but not important enough to be made statutory! After all, the first clauses in the Education Reform Act (ERA) boldly called for a broadly based curriculum that:

promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society: and prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. (Clause 2, page 1, ERA, 1988)

So the Government created 'cross-curricular elements' divided into dimensions, skills and themes (see National Curriculum Council [NCC], 1990a). These were essentially the cross-curricular issues that I had written about in the same year, 1990 (Dufour, 1990). Interestingly enough, one of the guidance reports on the 'elements' written by the NCC included citizenship – *Curriculum Guidance 8: Education for Citizenship*, the first key feature of it in official government statements (NCC, 1990b). While well intentioned, this non-statutory 'elemental' add-on to the National Curriculum, yet not part of the legal National Curriculum, was not a resounding success. As suggested above, only forward-looking teachers and schools got seriously involved in implementing these curricular approaches. There was no timetable time so they had to be 'infused'

into other subject areas, usually following a curriculum audit in the school. Teachers were generally not trained to deal with the content and the 'elements' were not part of the formal National Curriculum assessment requirements. And under the new National Curriculum and assessment arrangements, anything that was not statutory and not assessed was hardly going to be taken seriously. Therefore implementation across schools was variable and hit-and-miss. There is not the space here to analyse these developments in more depth but I have done so in two other places – in *The New Social Curriculum* (Dufour, 1990) and in more recently in *Developing Citizens* (Breslin & Dufour, 2006). Geoff Whitty and colleagues also published an important critique (Whitty et al, 1994).

2000-2010: citizenship

The New Labour Government, as part of its revision of the National Curriculum for the year 2000, encouraged the Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, to set up an enquiry looking into the possible shape of a new National Curriculum subject in Citizenship. The United Kingdom was one of the last countries to have official provision for this and some people had been calling for it for hundreds of years, such as the radical chemist, Joseph Priestley, who published, in 1765, his *Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life*. He wanted to see schools (and there was of course no state national schooling system then) giving their pupils an understanding of the country's constitution, laws and commerce. And by the end of the nineteenth century, when state schools had evolved, there was some citizenship teaching in some schools encouraged by some School Boards. There were texts and primers for pupils. I spent weeks in Birmingham City Municipal Library many years ago reading through these old texts. But as History and Geography became established in the school curriculum, by the early twentieth century any formal civic education depended on the goodwill of enlightened teachers and this situation continued right up until the year 2000.

Blunkett asked his former university tutor at Sheffield, Professor Bernard Crick, to chair the enquiry. A superb choice, in my view. Crick and I had inhabited parallel but rarely crossing curriculum domains from the 1960s onwards, with me constantly promoting social science subjects and integrated approaches in schools while Bernard was championing the teaching of politics and citizenship in schools. Over the years, we met several times at conferences but never collaborated – in hindsight, my loss.

The Crick Report, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*, was published in 1998 (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 1998). It was eventually agreed that implementation would take place in primary schools in the year 2000, as part of PSHE and as a non-statutory offer, while secondary schools would be required, statutorily, to begin implementation in 2002. This newly-conceived Citizenship was more than a subject, as the guidance from QCA began to reveal. It gave pupils from 5 to 16 the opportunity to study a wide range of social and political topics, and it included

an emphasis on skills, such as enquiry, discussion and debating. It also encouraged school councils and pupil involvement in the running of their schools – as Crick said many times, how can you teach about democracy in undemocratic institutions? It also promoted community involvement – different members of the community (councillors, pressure group activists) coming in to school to talk to pupils, and pupils going out into the community. The community could also be defined as local, national and international.

Later on, in 2008, as part of an overall revision of the National Curriculum, and following Keith Ajegbo's report, *Diversity and Citizenship* (Curriculum Review) (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007), an additional strand was added to Citizenship for secondary school pupils, that is called *Identities and Diversity: living together in the UK*. It covers explorations of diversity, ethnicity and 'Britishness' in the United Kingdom today.

The progress of Citizenship from the turn of the twenty-first century to today has been a rocky one. Regular research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) that has reported on this has suggested growing acceptance and more confident implementation (see the NFER website). There are also now GCSE and A-level courses in the subject. The problem of insufficient numbers of new teachers being trained to teach it remains. Teaching ideas and resources have been forthcoming with *Making Sense of Citizenship*, published by Hodder Murray in 2006, a copy of which was sent by the government to every school in the United Kingdom. And Tony Breslin and I brought together 34 UK citizenship experts to reflect on issues and to outline good teaching and learning ideas for the secondary school – see *Developing Citizens: a comprehensive introduction to effective citizenship education in the secondary school* (Hodder Murray [2006], and print-on-demand via Hodder Murray in 2011). The Citizenship Foundation, an education charity under the leadership of Tony Breslin until 2010, has remained the foremost subject and ideas organisation (see their website).

The crucial achievement of Citizenship is twofold, in the history of social and political education in the United Kingdom. It can combine all of the approaches discussed above and developed in the long history of the social curriculum – single-issue subject material (cross-curricular issues), aspects of the social sciences, aspects of history and geography, and aspects of religious education, in timetabled citizenship lesson time or as elements of all other subject areas. Secondly, it is for all children, of all ages and all abilities.

Anthropology 1970s–2010: here at last

The final achievement that closes the circle is the introduction of A-level Anthropology in 2010 by the AQA exam board, after six years of development by the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Education Committee. This is the last of the social sciences to enter the school system. The Committee consisted of eminent professors of anthropology, such as Brian Street, the chair, an educationist (me), sixth form teachers, the director of the RAI, Hilary Callan,

other co-opted people and two paid education officers, Gemma Jones, first, followed by Nafisa Fera. We had to slowly develop the syllabus (now called a ‘specification’) and devise the exam, all of which involved extensive epistemological discussions and consultations. We also had to guide the near-finished programme through various government quangos such as QCA and Ofqual.

AQA, the exam board, adopted us in the later stages and provided encouragement and support. It was a poignant success, especially for Brian Street and me because we had first worked together to promote teaching about other cultures in the 1970s. The full details can be found on the RAI website (www.therai.org.uk or the smart new education website: www.discoveranthropology.org.uk). A detailed article analysing our work can be found in the journal, *Anthropology in Action*, (Vol. 17, Numbers 2-3, Summer/Winter 2010) under the title of *Anthropology, Education and the Wider Public* by Hilary Callan & Brian Street.

2011: Shock and Awe – Coalition Government

Quite apart from the destructive impact of the cuts in education and other public services now taking place, the Coalition Government has instigated a Review of the National Curriculum in England (announced on 20 January 2011), spearheaded by Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education. Gove is no friend of progressive and liberating education and some of his utterances on the curriculum seem designed to put it back many decades, including on English teaching and History. There are clear indications that the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) will be favoured at university level, with huge funding cuts to the social sciences and humanities. Many subject associations are now concerned that the social sciences, humanities and citizenship in schools might be threatened in the Review. Most have submitted letters of concern and are lobbying to defend and promote their subjects. Many in the field of Citizenship Education have created a lobby organisation – ‘Democratic Life’ (see www.democraticlife.org.uk) – and have already met Michael Gove personally at the end of January 2011 to press their case for the vital role that citizenship education plays in the life of the school and society. If Citizenship is abolished or fundamentally modified, it would mean a step back in time. So much would be lost by British school pupils including the development of their knowledge, their engagement with their school and society and the many skills that Citizenship seeks to encourage, such as debating skills. The opportunity to learn debating skills is very much a part of the elite public schools such as Westminster or Eton, with a career trajectory for many, including Michael Gove, that includes private school, Oxford University, President of the Oxford Union and then, in no time at all, a cabinet post. It would be a very sad day for justice if 93% of pupils (those at state schools) are deprived of citizenship education, political education and the opportunity to hone their debating skills, thus leaving the 7% at private schools

to forge ahead to Oxbridge and high public office. I would have wasted my fifty years of activity in the field, and more importantly, over a hundred years of development of social and political education in schools would have come to nothing.

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