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THE ILLUSION OF CONSENSUS: ENGLISH TEACHING AND THE UK NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Louise Poulson

The most significant example of curriculum change in the United Kingdom in recent years undoubtedly has been the imposition of a centralized National Curriculum, of which English forms one of the compulsory core subjects. It has been a radical change, imposed by central government with little involvement from schools or teachers, and indeed, without reference to any substantial research within the domain. As the theme of this issue of *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* is the changing nature and history of English Language Arts instruction, consideration of the changes which have occurred in the UK, in education in general and, more specifically, within English teaching, seems relevant for discussion within this forum. Whilst we are involved in change, it is always difficult to evaluate the significance of it. In this respect, an awareness of the historical and evolutionary dimensions of where we are now may provide a useful and illuminating point of focus for our local difficulties.

Education in the UK became the subject of government attention from the mid 1980s, centering on the concern to raise standards in schools. Traditionally, decisions about the curriculum, of what should be taught and how, had been the responsibility of Local Education Authorities (UK county or metropolitan administration) and, to a certain extent, individual schools. Starting in 1984, however, a series of documents was published under the common theme of *Curriculum Matters*, one of which was devoted to the teaching of English from the ages of 5 to 16. The importance of this document was that it set out suggested attainments for pupils to reach at the ages of 7, 11, 14, and 16. It was greeted with almost universal hostility by English teachers in the UK. The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) expressed concern at its implications for the future direction of English teaching in schools. At the time, it was felt that the Department of

Education and Science, a central government agency, was likely to intervene in such a way as to promote a more rigid and traditional curriculum in schools.

In English teaching circles, there were fears that this would take the form of specification of content and a strong focus on learning outcomes. In addition, there were fears that the place of English within the school curriculum would be centered upon a narrow definition of language and grammar. These fears were the result of conviction expressed by members of the government and by the press that students leaving school in the UK were ill-equipped in basic literacy and numeracy and were thus handicapped in the employment market. Moreover, this was regarded as a direct consequence of the abandonment of formal teaching of clause and sentence structure. As long ago as 1921, the Newbolt Report, investigating the teaching of English in England, suggested that the learning of decontextualized grammatical structures and morphological difference, based upon the model of classical Greek and Roman grammars, was neither desirable nor effective in promoting and extending literacy. In spite of this, in the mid-1980s a Conservative government believed that a return to teaching old-fashioned grammar would help to cure what were perceived as some of the nation's ills. In the public mind also, a return to formal grammar and a focus upon standard English was equated with a rise in standards of literacy and, more generally, of morals and behaviour in society as a whole (Mathieson).

In 1987, the Secretary of State for Education (Kenneth Baker) announced the setting up of a Committee of Inquiry to be chaired by a mathematician, Sir John Kingman, to make recommendations upon the teaching of English Language in UK schools and the training of teachers in this area. It was made clear that the setting up of the Kingman Committee was part of a wider initiative to construct a nationally-determined curriculum. In a press notice, Baker announced:

I am working towards national agreement on the aims and objectives of English teaching in schools, in order to improve standards. But I am struck by a particular gap. Pupils need to know the workings of the English language if they are to use it effectively. Most schools no longer teach old-fashioned grammar. But little has been put in its place. (Kenneth Baker. DES Press Release 16 Jan. 1987)

The composition of the Kingman Committee offered little cause for optimism. There were no representatives from the subject association, NATE, nor were there any of those people such as James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Harold Rosen, or Andrew Wilkinson who had been a significant influence in research and teaching in English and Language Development in recent years. Harold Rosen, Emeritus Professor of Education at the London University Institute of Education, said of it: "The list of members constitutes a calculated insult to the English teaching fraternity" (Rosen). The Committee finally recommended a model of English language consisting of four parts: (i) the forms of the language, (ii) communication and comprehension of English, (iii) acquisition and development of language, and (iv) historical and geographical variation in English.

The Kingman Report elicited little enthusiasm from any quarter. It failed to satisfy critics of what were seen as sloppy, imprecise, and permissive approaches to the teaching of English language, and it disappointed those who had hoped for a recommendation to return to the teaching of formal grammar. Equally, it failed to engage the support of the English teaching profession, as it seemed so remote from the realities of English teaching in 1988. Lack of enthusiasm for the Kingman Report is summed up in the following comment from *English in Education*, the NATE journal, of Fall 1988: "It is unlikely that it [the Kingman Report] will be regarded as a benchmark in the teaching of English in years to come." Immediately following the Kingman Report in 1988, another Committee was established, chaired by Professor Brian Cox of Manchester University, previously a member of the Kingman Committee. It was the report of this group which would form the basis of the Statutory Orders of English as part of National Curriculum legislation. An important difference between the Kingman and Cox Committees was that the latter had the task of formulating a curriculum for the whole of English with Drama and Media Studies, specifying attainment targets in the subject for students at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16. Once more, the composition of the Committee failed to include representation of the subject association, NATE, or any of those significant names so obviously excluded from the Kingman Committee. However, in spite of initial suspicion, the final Cox Report of 1989 appeared to acknowledge a range of views on the teaching of English.

Whilst there was critical debate about the initial National Curriculum proposals in general, such as the critique published by NATE in 1987 and,

specifically, of the proposals for English (Davies, 1989; Brooker & Humm, 1989; Mathieson, 1991), opposition to the final result seemed ambivalent. This was partly because many people involved in English teaching felt relief that their worst fears for the institutionalisation of an extreme reactionary position, strongly suspected after the publication of *English 5-16: Curriculum Matters I* in 1984, would not be fully realized. On publication of the Cox Report, educationalists were grateful for the liberalizing influence of many of those involved in the construction of the National Curriculum documents. Under such circumstances, there was a general feeling that organized opposition would be both churlish and dangerous in that it might undermine the efforts of those who had done much to ensure some sort of balance. It was also felt that sustained opposition would, in addition, provide ammunition to those who were in favour of a more reactionary restatement of what the English curriculum should be. There was also the feeling, even within NATE, that the English Programmes of Study—and to a lesser extent the Statements of Attainment—were acceptable. Editorials in *English in Education*, Summer 1989 and Summer 1990 editions, reflect this. The editorial of Summer 1989 reported on a survey of the opinions of a sample of those with influential roles in English teaching in the UK: "With some exceptions they were happy about the way it [the Cox Report] turned out. Respondents felt that the National Curriculum could have been a lot worse." The editorial goes on to say that the "early vociferous opposition to the very idea of National Curriculum English has dwindled into an almost unanimous cautious acceptance. In the absence of any readily identifiable alternative, it has seemed better to live with what seems, on the surface, reassuringly familiar." Even the attainment targets set for children at the ages of 7, 11, 14, and 16, which had been the subject of such strong criticism in *English 5-16: Curriculum Matters I*, were grudgingly accepted in 1989.

The National Curriculum documents present a seemingly pluralist consensus as to what constitutes English as a subject, one in which differences are identified, but nonetheless can be accommodated within the same framework. In order for this to be maintained, difference and dissent had to be minimized. Indeed, the Cox Report made clear that dissent and debate about the nature of English as a subject and its pedagogies were not viewed as desirable. It stated that: ". . .an unfortunate feature of much discussion of English teaching is the false and unhelpful polarization of views. . .people set in opposition to each others' individual or social aims or utilitarian and imaginative aims, or language and literature. . ." and that since

“...the best practice reflects a consensus rather than extreme positions, it is important that this is not seen as some timid compromise but rather an attempt to show the relation between these views within a larger framework” (DES/WO. 2:6). However, within this apparent pluralism are submerged questions of critical importance relating to the content and pedagogy of English within both Primary (Elementary) and Secondary (High) schools.

Two issues of fundamental importance can be identified: Firstly, the debate about subject philosophy (in short, what English Departments should be about), largely conducted within the University English Departments but which has also had some effect on the higher grades in High Schools, may yet be shown to have influenced a new generation of English teachers. This debate has particularly centered on the influence of deconstructionist, post-structuralist, and feminist theories, in which language and literary texts are seen as cultural and social products, as opposed to support for a more traditional syllabus based upon an accepted literary canon and pedagogy strongly influenced by I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*. At Cambridge in the early 1980's, the failure to give tenure to a lecturer in the English Faculty, Colin McCabe, because of his structuralist theoretical position and, more recently, the appointment of the Marxist theorist, Terry Eagleton, to the Wharton Chair at Oxford have provided a focus for these tensions. Secondly, there is the issue of Standard English: what it is and where it should be featured in the curriculum of UK schools. The National Curriculum documents render both of these as unproblematic and consign any debate or discussion of them to the “false and unhelpful polarization of views” already identified (DES/WO 1989). And yet, it is clear that these are the very areas in which critical debate about the English curriculum is taking place—not only in the UK, but more widely in the international forum.

Whilst it is supposed that consensus can be reached between a diversity of views about the content and methodologies of English as a subject, no consideration is currently being given as to how this will be achieved in the absence of debate. The consensus identified by Professor Cox and the National Curriculum English Working Group was seen to consist of five different yet compatible and equally valid approaches to the subject: (i) cultural heritage, (ii) adult needs, (iii) personal growth, (iv) cross-curricular, and (v) cultural analysis (DES/WO 1989. Ch2). Davies argues that the identification of combinations of the above approaches constitutes a relatively new formulation of English as a subject, one which attempts to combine

definitions and emphases which have occurred as the consequence of differing theoretical and historical contexts, but which are not necessarily compatible within the same general framework. There are, indeed, good reasons for arguing not only that these five views are substantially misrepresented, or at least under-represented, in the Cox Report, but that at least two of them are intrinsically inimical to each other. That notwithstanding, it is also clear that although the rhetoric of the Report emphasizes consensus and the equal validity and compatibility of these five views, there is evidence to suggest that the report as a whole actually privileges the *cultural heritage* model. The choice of terminology reveals an endorsement of the view that reading of certain kinds of literature is enriching and morally improving. There are several instances of this. For example, in *English 5-16* (DES/WO 1989) it is claimed that

studying Literature and encouraging others in that study is an enrichment for pupil and teacher alike. (Ch 7:3)

Through looking at literature from different parts of the world and written from different points of view, pupils should be in a position to gain a better understanding of the cultural heritage of English literature itself. (Ch 7:5)

A *cultural heritage* view of English presupposes the importance and pre-eminence of a particular literary tradition—that which in the 1860s Mathew Arnold identified as the best that had been thought and written and which has traditionally formed the basis of University English syllabi. It is represented as a view which emphasizes the responsibility of schools to lead children to “an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language” (DES/WO 1989, Ch 2:24). This view of the subject is not incompatible with that defined as *personal growth*, in which the purpose of English teaching is to encourage the development of individual response to text and the production of writing which is expressive of the self. This has often been regarded as best achieved by the exposure of students to traditional literary texts, and the two views have been linked in the work of such people as F.R. Leavis, David Holbrook, and Denys Thompson. The influence of Leavis and the Cambridge English School on English teaching in UK schools has been discussed in detail by Medway.

The view of English termed as *adult needs* within the UK National Curriculum documents has a rather different history. Whilst it has never been properly a subject philosophy in opposition to that identified as *cultural heritage*, it is an ideologically different representation of what the purpose of English teaching should be. It is, in many ways, a utilitarian view of English as a subject, but not one which has always been held by the politically conservative. It is a view of the subject which sees the major emphasis as being on the development of literacy as an instrumental social and economic need rather than as essentially personal or aesthetic in focus. In its more radical form, this view of the purpose of English is compatible with that which is identified as having to do with *cultural analysis*. A radical view of an *adult needs* approach might involve the development of a critical literacy which would enable both individuals and communities to challenge the economic and political *status quo* such as that expressed by Freire (Freire & Macedo). We must, however, exercise caution in identifying these two perspectives too closely. An *adult needs* view of the subject might equally, and arguably more commonly, express a rather less libertarian ideology, one in which the purpose of English teaching is to equip students with the kinds of literacy which would enable them to take their place in what is often referred to as the "world of work." This is, in many respects, more accurately an *employers'* needs view of the purpose of English teaching. In the 1970s and 80s it gained credibility and power, particularly within the non-academic sectors of further education in the UK. It developed strength within the economic context of rising unemployment, particularly within the 16-21 age group. It has been argued (Poulson) that government agencies and industry sought to locate the reasons for youth unemployment within the economic context of rising unemployment, particularly within the 16-21 age group. It has also been argued (Poulson) that government agencies and industry sought to locate the reasons for youth unemployment within that group itself, the lack of paid employment being considered a consequence of an inadequately literate and numerate school-leaving population. Clearly, a utilitarian view of the purpose of English as the provision of basic competencies in literacy could not form a part of a broader notion of cultural analysis in which students are supposedly helped "towards a critical understanding of the world and cultural environment in which they live" (DES/WO 1989 Ch2:2).

In many respects, the approach to English identified in the Cox Report as *cultural analysis* would seem to imply not simply a subject philosophy, denying as it does the very epistemological basis of subject knowledge in

English. This particular view of English, as a dimension of Critical Studies, examines the ideologies prevalent within particular social and cultural formations. Such an approach would, necessarily, question the whole basis of a *cultural heritage* view of English by challenging the limited and ethnocentric literary canon upon which such a view is based. It would, by implication, also challenge a *personal growth* view, in that the existential subject could no longer be taken for granted. This *cultural analysis* view has its origins partly within literary deconstruction and post-structuralist cultural theory, and whilst many interesting questions have been raised within these fields which need to be addressed in the content and pedagogy of English, it cannot be assumed that such a perspective can co-exist with a *cultural heritage* view. The French philosopher, Pierre Macherey, has argued that if literary studies were to be transformed, it would not be enough to shift its domain and add new material in the form of an alternative canon; it would, in fact, be necessary "to completely change the system in which the categories of literary study are thought out" (9).

To suggest that we can subscribe to all five approaches to English studies simultaneously is an example of the confusion pervading the UK National Curriculum documentation. Such confusion is not, of course, a characteristic of the National Curriculum documentation alone. In English teaching circles in general, there are those who assert a particular philosophy whilst simultaneously maintaining attitudes and perspectives firmly rooted in an opposing philosophy. Over the past few years, it has not been difficult to find those who support humanistic approaches with utilitarian arguments; who promote functionalism whilst denying validity to the structuralism that necessarily informs linguistic functionalism; who deny a significant role to syllabi whilst simultaneously agonising over content; and who assert the importance of method without seriously engaging the issue of what methodology is actually for.

Whilst our concerns in the UK are local, there are many issues involved here which have implications within the international context of English Language Arts. Whatever political changes there may be in the future, and whatever the fate of the National Curriculum in the UK, there can be little doubt that it has and will set an agenda for debate and research. In this respect, everyone working within English Studies would probably agree that we are dealing with questions of genuine significance the answers to which will shape the future direction of the curriculum. This being the case, it is

important that the questions themselves and any potential responses to them should be clearly formulated and adequately contextualized. Within the context provided by an examination of the history of English teaching in general, it is, of course, possible to appreciate, without denying their significance, that neither the questions we are currently asking as teachers of English, nor indeed the range of possible answers that are emerging, is entirely new. In this sense, we would be mistaken to suppose that we are living through a period of unprecedented change and innovation. The idea that languages are for the communication of meaning is not a recent discovery, nor is the challenge to that position which we find currently formulated within post-structuralism.

What, however, is new is the attempt to pretend that conflicting positions can be reconciled in the absence of genuine debate, or that the absence of debate can reasonably be identified as consensus. However much the official agenda may be narrowed to exclude diversity of opinion about the purpose and content of the English curriculum, and to exclude the diversity of cultural and linguistic experience of students, these things will not disappear. The National Curriculum is now being implemented in UK schools, and as policy is put into practice, it becomes very clear that implementation is being mediated by teachers' beliefs, experiences, and the social context in which they work.

Differing views on English, or on any subject, do not emerge in a vacuum; they relate to pedagogy in general and to other areas of intellectual debate. In particular, they often reflect the concerns of linguists, philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists. Difference of opinion is not necessarily counter-productive, even where it threatens to disrupt the *status quo*, and it would be unfair and unrealistic to regard certain attitudes within English teaching as simply perverse, or to dismiss the concerns of educationists as representing "false and unhelpful polarization" (DES/WO 1989). Within this domain, disagreements are not confined to caveats or reservations, important though these may be. They also relate to fundamental issues of general principle, issues which extend far beyond English teaching itself. It is sometimes easier to appreciate the nature of these general principles when we engage in a different perspective. This may enable us to see that consensus is reached by a number of different routes, and that both fashion and imposition may play as powerful a role as reasoned discussion. But the

illusion of consensus has generally had the effect of suppressing dissent and of concealing significant differences of opinion.

That this is the case in the UK has been revealed quite clearly in recent months in relation to a project funded by the UK central government from 1989 through 1992: the Language in the National Curriculum project. The aim of the project was to enhance the teaching of English language in line with the recommendations of the Kingman Report by training teachers in Primary (Elementary) and Secondary (High) schools and by producing materials for in-service work. Regional consortia were set up throughout the UK, each with its own co-ordinator. The original intention of the Department of Education and Science in funding the Kingman (later called Language in the National Curriculum or LINC) project was to provide a top-down or cascade model of in-service training about language. The reality was rather different. LINC projects, under the direction of individual co-ordinators, became much more flexible and involved teachers proactively. They allowed teachers to reflect upon and to develop their own practice rather than constructing them about language. In short, it became much more of a grass-roots and practitioner-based initiative than central government had originally intended. The result was that publication of in-service materials, consisting of modules on various aspects of language, was suppressed by the Department of Education and Science. Those involved in writing and development were informed that they might neither publish nor discuss the material as individuals. Even so, the LINC materials have been circulated in an unofficial format, and teachers have discussed and used them.

We may well enquire as to the nature of these subversive materials. They were all related to aspects of language as a social phenomenon, subject to change and diversity and included: multilingualism; accent and dialect; language and social groups. No official explanation has been offered by the government department as to why suppression of these materials has occurred, but it has been indicated unofficially that it is because these particular units place too much emphasis upon the social dimensions of language. It is interesting to note that the LINC materials were never intended to be used for the direct instruction of students. Equally interesting is the government emphasis upon prescriptive models of language use, as indicated by official disapproval of using real examples of writing produced by children. It is undeniable that this crude and, arguably, ineffective form of censorship is at odds with the pluralism stated in the official documents. It effectively denies

any view of English which may encourage cultural or social analysis, or which may suggest that language is diverse and changeable in both form and usage, even though this is an approach to the subject stated within the National Curriculum documents as being acceptable and as co-existent with other philosophical stances as a dimension of cultural analysis.

The desire to promote a sense of commonality or, more accurately, uniformity, evident in the denial of diversity and the privileging of certain cultural norms, seems also to underlie the promotion of Standard English. Whilst English is a specific language, it is also a language which has many standards and many varieties; a language which many people for whom it is not a mother tongue use daily for a range of purposes; a language in which people of many different cultures write for many different purposes. Yet the National Curriculum for English proposes that all pupils be given access to what is referred to as Standard English and the English Language "as if the use of capitalization and the definite article here were unproblematic, as if English and Standard English were single, definable, monolithic entities. And yet, in English teaching circles, we have been accustomed to referring to Englishes and standards" (Cromble & Poulson). Although no teacher would wish to deny children access to an understanding of language standardization, few teachers would wish to see institutionalized such a simplistic codification of such a limited and ethnocentric view.

The issue of whether we can, in fact, refer to such a thing as Standard English has, of course, been the subject of intense and critical debate, most recently by Sir Randolph Quirk in the UK and Professor Braj Kachru of the University of Illinois-Urbana in the USA. It is clear that the British can claim no monopoly in relation to issues in English, nor can they claim to have any more right than any other users to be prescriptive about standardization. There are, as the Quirk-Kachru debate has shown, very real problems in relation to the definition and delineation of language standardization as a concept. In one sense, it is true to say that there is no such thing as Standard English. It is, however, possible to talk of standardized varieties, provided that it is accepted that there are no absolutes here: what is perceived as acceptable will vary within time and according to place as well as from community to community. It is interesting to note that at the same time as the UK National Curriculum was aiming to promote cultural and linguistic homogeneity, the NCTE in the USA in a statement made prior to President Bush's Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, in September 1989,

was calling for a broadening of the English curriculum to acknowledge cultural diversity in the US and for an increase in the numbers of ethnic minority teachers. Within the wider European context, the 1985 Chevalier Report on the teaching of French in France recommended similar action in order to take account of the realities of modern French society. Evidently, the UK is taking a direction already tried and found to be lacking in other parts of the world.

My concern in this article, and in the context of a readership outside the UK, is to draw attention to and invite debate upon these very problems. Whilst, as I have already stated, they are local concerns, it would be foolish to suppose that similar concerns were not held in other areas of the world or that these very questions had not indeed been addressed by others who have already experienced a centralized curriculum in some form. The closing down of debate, the lack of recognition or respect for research, the assertion of consensus which hides within its liberal rhetoric deep contradictions, are all features of the anti-intellectual political climate in which we find ourselves towards the end of the century.

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