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**POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY IN ENGLAND: A SUMMER
SNAPSHOT**

Stephen Tchudi

During the summer of 1988, Professor Marilyn Wilson and I led twenty-seven school and college teachers from Michigan and other states on a four week study tour to London. Along with exploring London's rich (even mind numbing) cultural, literary, and historical resources, our students had an opportunity to meet with a number of distinguished British specialists in English education, including John Dixon, formerly of the Bretton Hall College, author of Growth Through English; James Britton, generally acknowledged as the father of the "new English" movement in Great Britain; Patrick Creber of Exeter University, author of Sense and Sensitivity in Teaching English; Don Williams, Senior Primary Advisor for the Wiltshire County schools; and Peter Abbs, University of Sussex, author of several books on the value of literary and artistic education.

From these consultants, from newspaper accounts, and from back fence and bus stop conversations, we discovered that we had arrived in London during a particularly turbulent time in British education. Parliament had just passed a major Education Reform Act. (The irony of its acronym, ERA, was not

lost on the Americans.) This bill was the culmination of almost three decades of debate over education in England.

As most American teachers know, the British schools have traditionally been elitist and selective, particularly at the secondary level. The famous and feared "Eleven Plus" examinations identified children--at age eleven--who would be permitted to attend the higher "grammar" schools and thus prepare themselves for a place at a university. In contrast to the United States, only a small number of British students--perhaps 15%--were able to go on to postsecondary education. The balance were effectively excluded from the intellectual, social, and fiscal advantages of higher education. Places at the universities--especially the Big Two, Cambridge and Oxford--generally went to children who were trained outside the tax-supported system in private schools. It was the rare working class child who could break through the tyranny and biases of the Eleven Plus exams to earn the scary opportunity to compete at a university with students from a different social class.

Since World War II, however, there has been a concern for opening the system to more populist usage. New "secondary modern" or "comprehensive" schools replaced many of the grammar schools, and these schools educated youngsters from a wide range of social classes. The Eleven Plus examinations are gone, and students now take an examination for a General Certificate of Secondary Education, which is used for a variety of purposes, including, but not limited to, college admission.

Many of the new directions in British teaching which have been publicized in the United States in the past several decades were developed in the democratic secondary modern schools. John Dixon, Patrick Creber, Peter

Abbs, James Britton, and many other leaders in the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) "grew up" as teachers of English in the comprehensive schools, struggling with the problems associated with teaching a wide range of students, many of whom were not academically oriented.

The widely quoted Bullock Report, A Language for Life, issued by Her Majesty's Stationery Office in the mid-1970's, was a high point for the advocates of the "new English" or "growth through English" movement. NATE was well represented on the Bullock committee, and James Britton himself wrote major portions of the report.

However, times and conditions have changed in England. In the mid-seventies, Britain experienced high unemployment and a general national depression, both economic and spiritual. Dissatisfaction with many aspects of British politics and economics emerged; in particular, there was considerable criticism of "socialized" programs: medicine, welfare, education. Thus even as the Bullock report was being implemented in many schools, a number of British intellectuals were complaining that the schools were in decline, and urging a reversal of direction in terms analogous to those of the back-to-basics movement in the United States. Margaret Thatcher, elected Prime Minister in 1979, has attempted to reverse the perceived declines.

Through her Secretary of Education, Mr. Kenneth Baker, Thatcher has declared that the comprehensive school movement was a mistake, at least insofar as it led to the decline of the grammar schools. Baker has boasted that during his tenure, virtually all requests to close down grammar schools have been rejected. Thatcher and Baker together want to restore those schools,

which they see as part of the British national heritage. (See bibliography: "Save Our Grammar Schools.")

Dissatisfaction is not limited to the top government officials. This past summer, a school inspectors' report led to headlines declaring "Teaching is Substandard" (Broome, "Inspectors of Schools. . ."). The London Times concluded that "Joe Public" now wants the schools to "emphasize academic achievement, instill good discipline, insist on uniforms, and make students conform." Sheila Lawlor of the Centre for Policy Studies, a think tank serving the Prime Minister, believes there has been a "confusion of social services and education" (Broome, ILEA Abolition. . .).

The Education Reform Act of 1988, then, has been a response to widespread public and political unease. Like many of the reform reports in the United States, it sees the schools as being the source of and solution to many national problems. In particular, the ERA stresses jobs, with education perceived as preparing students to enter the employment market successfully. The reform act contains hundreds of provisions, but two of these are of particular interest to teachers of English, both in England and in the United States. These are the issues of local control and the national curriculum.

Like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher has campaigned on a platform of getting government out of people's lives and businesses. She has successfully "privatised" several institutions and industries which were formerly run by the government, for example, British Telecom, and some aspects of public television. In the spirit of privatisation, the ERA will allow individual schools to "opt out" of their local education authority (LEA) and to receive funding directly from the government. It's as if, in the United States, one could bypass

the state and intermediate school districts, and possibly even the local board of education, to have federal support flow directly to a single school or cluster of schools. The LEA's, which presently offer and administer a variety of academic and social services, are portrayed by the national government as being bureaucratic and inefficient. Thus, in principle, the ERA creates local control by giving funds directly back to the community, specifically to parent-run boards of governors.

While this sort of local control sounds democratic, there are predictions of serious problems. For example, the Inner London Education Authority, which many of us from MSU have seen as an exemplary resource for teachers, will be shut down in 1990 and local schools will take over its services--if they can. Many teachers and administrators in London are predicting chaos and inefficiency due to small scale duplication of services. As the LEA's are disbanded, there will be a loss of professional expertise as well. The local governments are making efforts to educate parents on how to run their own schools (Westminster), but there is great concern that parents underestimate the efforts and expertise required to run a school through "parent power" (Neville). There are even predictions that "opting out" will create a power and leadership vacuum at the local level.

How then, will educational reform come about?

The Education Reform Act provides a not-so-subtle answer in its provisions for a "national curriculum," which will be in place by 1990. This will have a core of three subjects--science, math, and English--supplemented by work in music, physical education, geography, and history. Students will be examined on their mastery of the principal subjects at ages seven, eleven, and sixteen, a

scheme which sounds similar to the scheduling of the Michigan Assessment. However, these exams will be conducted locally, by teachers, rather than through a national testing program.

Thus the concept of "local control" is vague, even illusory. Having worked to abolish the local education authorities and to put the running of the schools into the hands of parents, the government has turned around to create a national curriculum to which the locals must adhere. But then, changing directions again, it puts the testing of the curriculum back in the schools.

How much the national curriculum will actually affect students, then, is a matter of some debate. There is, however, a great deal of concern among prominent English educators concerning the content of the English curriculum, which is being directed by the Kingman Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English. This group, chaired by Sir John Kingman of Bristol University, released its controversial report in April 1988 (Kingman Committee). The committee has recommended a model of English language as a basis for teacher training and described "targets for attainment" in the 7, 11, and 16 year assessments.

The voice of James Britton and the "growth through English" advocates is not to be heard in the Kingman report. No member of NATE served on the committee; nor does Sir John Kingman have any experience as a teacher of English. Clearly the government did not want the Kingman report to be another Bullock, and it isn't. Kingman describes the content of English as:

- (1) Forms of the English language (including sounds, letters, words, and sentences);

- (2) Comprehension and communication;
- (3) Acquisition and development;
- (4) Historical and geographical variation.

As John Dixon pointed out, this is an "old fashioned" linguistic conceptualization, which, while valid in its own right, utterly ignores such matters as the role of language in concept development, and, above all, the personal and social uses of language at home and in the classroom. Further, the model makes no mention of literature and drama, which have been deferred for study at a later date--a significant delay.

In a curious (and quite likely unknowing) echo of James Britton, Kingman argues that language skills and knowledge can be mastered explicitly (so they can be stated) and implicitly (practiced without formal knowledge). Britton has long said that implicit rule mastery is at the heart of language acquisition; Kingman converts that notion into a rationale for testing: Implicit learning should be assessed by teachers through classroom informal observation; explicit learning can be clearly targeted for mastery as part of the national curriculum. The bottom line of the Kingman report is those explicit targets, which turn out to be matters of spelling, punctuation, paragraphs, and language form.

As Peter Abbs explained to our group, the Kingman report takes an utterly mechanistic, job-skills view of language and its functions. The parallels between Kingman and the basic skills and testing movements in America are apparent. Several MSU students remarked that it was discouraging to see England following a course which had been practiced in so many areas of the United States without a great deal of demonstrated success. We had no strong

reason to believe that the national curriculum and its vague but oppressive testing scheme would do anything more than hinder teachers--especially the good ones who are knowledgeable about language growth and development.

In the meantime, the uproar over the Education Reform Act and the Kingman Report seems to be obscuring another significant debate within the English teaching profession, one that also has parallels in the United States. There is a concern in many quarters that the "new English" or "growth through English" movement has become a "new orthodoxy" (Allen).

Peter Abbs, who in the late sixties and early seventies was a strong voice for growth through English, now argues that the new English has not been an unqualified success and that it has led to some losses in the curriculum--particularly in the study of literature (Abbs, lecture and various articles). Sounding a bit like an E. D. Hirsch, Abbs suggests that students are reading little more than short, easy excerpts of contemporary writing which have been chosen with sociology, not literature, in mind. He favors replacing the thematic "topics" approach of the growth model with genre study, which would provide students with what he calls "a map of the discipline" through examination of language structures in literature. Abbs has engaged in debate with John Dixon and others on these issues (Stratta and Dixon, Hadley, Protherough). Although many of the Americans did not find Abbs' argument for a genre approach persuasive, we found that his rationale for including good literature in the English program considerably stronger than E. D. Hirsch's "cocktail party" view of cultural knowledge.

Further, Abbs has offered a powerful rationale in favor of treating English as a subject within the arts, rather than in the humanities or, even worse, as a

job skill (Living Powers). He sees language as part of an "aesthetic mode of learning" which must be acknowledged in the schools. Drawing on the work of Howard Gardner and his view of multiple intelligences, Abbs claims that the schools have concentrated exclusively on cognitive modes of learning and have thus failed to train the whole mind. By allying English with art, music, dance, and drama, Abbs feels we can restore the balance. Despite his disagreements with Dixon and the growth through English crowd, Abbs is clearly their ally in being vehemently opposed to the directions proposed by Kingman.

Don Williams of the Wiltshire schools reinforced the impression that the British take the art/English relationship seriously. He, like Dixon and Stratta, argues that the new English has enlarged, not restricted the range of literature in the schools. He described primary school programs which present a "seamless garment" of instruction which cuts across disciplinary boundaries and employs multiple modes of discourse and expression. Williams seemed less worried about the Kingman committee than did our other consultants, perhaps because of his view of tradition. He reminded us that the Wiltshire schools have been experimenting with progressive methods for over sixty years, and he chided Americans for our tendency to run through new ideas in short cycles. He seemed content to continue with his work, using the Kingman committee's concern for language as ammunition for his own campaign to extend the use of oral English and drama in the primary schools.

But James Britton was not accepting of Kingman. The intellectual leader of the growth through English movement has just celebrated his eightieth birthday and continues to pursue his interests in language education with pro-

jects ranging from an essay in celebration of Louise Rosenblatt's eightieth birthday to an explication of Vygotsky's contributions to educational theory. He told us that Kingman and the ERA represent a retreat from an emerging view of British education as offering access to social rank for all people. There is a progressive tradition in teaching in England, begun in the forties, fifties, and sixties, as the comprehensive schools emerged, and extending through the seventies and early eighties with Bullock. Many British teachers have developed a concern for and expertise in teaching to the individual learner. All of that stands in jeopardy in 1988.

A possible middle ground in all this may be found in the work of John Dixon, who, with his colleague, Leslie Stratta of Birmingham University, has been struggling within the constraints of the British examination system to develop more rational ways of assessment. Dixon and Stratta have argued that the traditional three-hour "sit down" examination is no measure of a student's true abilities (Dixon, Dixon and Stratta, NATE "Proposals..."). They have lobbied successfully for a system of "course based assessment" in the General Certificate of Secondary Education, where students can submit a portfolio of work completed over the last two years of secondary school to supplement or balance the formal examination scores. The portfolio is marked by the student's teacher, monitored by other English faculty in the school, then checked against marking guidelines provided by the examination boards. The result, in principle, is a synthesis of examinations and schoolwork: You are assessed on what you do. The gap between teaching and testing is thus reduced. There is reason to believe that this model might be employed with the national curriculum as well.

The course-based assessment plan is by no means flawless. Head teachers in the British schools report feeling swamped by this new addition to their work load (Tytler). There is a concern, too, that course work will be narrowed to reflect traditional content of exams, thus impinging on academic freedom. There is even a worry that course-based assessment may destroy student/teacher relationships, since the teacher, not a distant external authority, will be responsible for providing the marks which so powerfully affect a student's future (Martin). On the other hand, at least one letter to the Times demonstrates the political/pedagogical synthesis Dixon and Stratta are trying to achieve. A student wrote in to say that course-based assessment had encouraged her to write far more than she would have in preparing for a set exam and offered her the opportunity to read a number of books, not just a few texts set for the examination. She concluded by noting that in former times, students did little in English until two weeks before examinations, then went on a crash program of study. Now, she said, English work takes place across the final years of schooling (Oliver).

There is no simple way to sum up what is happening in British English teaching today. Although I have called this article a "snapshot," I hope that it has, in fact, presented a holograph, a three dimensional portrait. Certainly, the analogies with American education are clear; indeed, many of these emerging British practices are clearly modeled on the United States.

The result, as James Britton told us, is that "Government and education are on a collision course." If he is right--and the odds are strong that he is--when the collision takes place, British children and a long tradition of teacher inquiry will be the casualties.

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