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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Peter Medway, John Hardcastle,
Georgina Brewis, and David Crook
*English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy:
Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945–1965*

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English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945–1965 is a unique work in the field of curriculum study examining the teaching of English in three schools in the United Kingdom. The book's uniqueness is derived from its concentration upon one subject and its combination of primary documentary sources and oral history. The authors, Medway, Hardcastle, Brewis, and Crook, tell a compelling story of curriculum and instruction at Minchenden Grammar School, Walworth School, and Hackney Downs in London. They weave this story into a larger narrative about evolving social norms and ideals over two decades.

The authors' interest in what they term "rescue archaeology" (1) leads them to inquire into the curriculum as rhetoric but, more so—and rather ambitiously—into curriculum as taught and learned. Oral history is thus an important tool in the narrative reconstruction of what was taught, how it was taught, how instruction was received, and how these evolved with respect to the English curriculum. Post-World War II London evolved "from austerity combined with optimistic attempts at reconstruction under a Labour government to rising affluence and a new consumer economy under the Conservatives ... and, accompanying that, the beginnings of far-reaching movement in cultural life" (3). These transformations in social life did not have a monolithic effect on the teaching of English across the schools examined in the study, and yet the study, while limited in its concentration upon one subject, illuminates the shifting place of disciplines in the formal curriculum of schooling that we often take for granted.

It is hard to imagine a time when English was not formalized as a subject of study. Yet, as the authors note, it was only accepted in London in the 1830s and, thereafter,

in Oxford and Cambridge in 1893 and 1917 respectively. In the early 1920s, it was on shakier ground than history, modern languages, and the sciences. It is, perhaps, because of its newfound status as an established subject in London's schools that the teaching of English was problematized and was subject to scrutiny and revision in the years of social upheaval that followed World War II.

The authors note the increased interest in oral history, particularly as it relates to documentary filmmaking in relation to the historical context under examination in the book. They acknowledge as well the relative dearth of female voices that inform the study. This is despite the fact that Minchenden and Walworth were mixed schools—inclusive of both sexes—and the heads of department at Minchenden were all female up until 1959. Alarming, but alas not surprisingly, women's voices are not prominent in the source material. One reason for this silence that the authors posit is the reality that most women faced post marriage; they were compelled to surrender their teaching positions in order to attend to domestic responsibilities.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the social context that frames the two decades of the study implicating a macroscopic (the U.K.) and a microscopic (London) point of view. This context was a site of continuity and change, influenced by rapid transformation and by periods of stability or, at the least, longevity. The authors characterize the years after World War II as a period first of “radical political change” (17) under the Labour Party, followed by thirteen years of political stability beginning in 1951 under the Conservative Party. When Labour regained the reigns of government in 1964, the accelerated rate of social change across the U.K. was omnipresent. Decades of austerity gave way to growing affluence, and various aspects of cultural efflorescence, which were manifest in fashion, art, and media.

At various stages in the text, the authors stress that education was increasingly seen as an important investment that merited public attention and reconstruction. The Spens Report of 1938, for instance, which recommended three types of secondary schools—grammar schools with academic orientation, modern schools for the general public, and technical schools for vocational training—and the Education Act of 1944, which trusted school allocation to the “11 plus,” a set of psychometric tests that measured IQ as well as literacy and numeracy aptitude in children aged ten or eleven, set the stage for an increasingly technocratic and centralized educational bureaucracy that was charged with organizing a system of schooling where education was mandatory until age fifteen. (The age was set at fifteen in 1943. It was raised to sixteen in 1973).

Curiously, this centralization did not pertain directly to curriculum. The quotation that follows, drawn from the Minister of Education, merits attention: “Once we start any central discussion of text books, we embark on a slippery slope which leads to totalitarianism. It has always been a very important principle of the education system in this country that the Central Department does not attempt to influence the curriculum of the schools in any detail” (20). This sentiment seems curious and, perhaps, utopian or naïve in light of the present-day regulation of curriculum standards and the obsessive assessment and raking of student achievement. Yet it is indicative of a tension that the authors deftly identify and discuss. Following the war,

many educationists were drawn to teaching in order to refashion society along social meliorist lines; schools could be a means of molding a more just and equitable society. Other educationists sought ways of reestablishing a period of tranquility, where radical excesses and authoritarian principles would be mitigated.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 concentrate on Hackney Downs, Walworth, and Minchenden, respectively. These chapters serve as case studies, wherein the teaching and learning of English is examined against the backdrop of social transformation elaborated upon previously. Each chapter offers rich detail and elegant prose. Chapter 6, "The Three Schools—What Have We Learned," is a fulfilling summary of the rich analyses offered in the preceding three chapters, in that it summarizes the teaching of English in each of the schools under examination, recaps the names of seminal figures that influenced instruction and curriculum implementation, and situates the discussion in light of the institutional, demographic, and locational differences between each of the case schools. The commonalities and divergences in English instruction are compelling to explore, particularly as these seem to be often ubiquitous in contemporary English instruction. These include deficiencies of textbook resources, an emphasis on grammar and examination, cerebral or critical analysis of passages, a tension between teaching the spirit of the text and skill development, and the tension between academic instruction and teaching that would relate to the students' lives outside of the school.

The tensions noted here reflect, in many instances, the themes of progressive education, which competed with traditional education for the hearts and minds of educationists across North America and in Europe following World War I. How could schools relate to the individual learner? How might they integrate school life with modern life, as it existed in a post-war existence? How should education find a way to enable learners to actively engage with their learning and with the texts treated in school?

English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy frames an interesting counterpoint to Canadian curriculum history in that its themes are pertinent and salient, but the context is somehow unfamiliar and foreign to the Canadian reader. At its best, the study compels us to hold the world that we know up to scrutiny and to imagine how it might have evolved otherwise. It seems a clarion call for more transatlantic study of curriculum history, particularly as it relates to the themes of modernity and tradition. No subject seems more traditional than English, and yet its space in the public school curricula has evolved and will, inexorably, continue to evolve.