

## HISTORY IN ENGLAND AND WALES: THE NEW NATIONAL CURRICULUM

England and Wales have always prided themselves on a decentralised education service in which the schools have had a remarkable degree of independence to determine the content and assessment of the curriculum. Admittedly, there is constraint and some degree of centralisation in the courses for 14 to 16-year olds and for the 16 to 19 age group in that a national system of syllabuses and examinations exist. But even here there is wide choice and, for the 14 to 16 age group, the opportunity for a school to submit its own syllabus and methods of examination for approval by one of the national examination boards. The 1988 Education Act (which applies to England, Wales and Northern Ireland - Scotland has its own education system) is changing most of this. For the first time a National, centrally determined, Curriculum is being developed for three core subjects (English, science and mathematics) and seven foundation subjects which include technology, art, geography and history. The National Curriculum will be taught to children during the years of compulsory schooling (from the age of 5 to 16) and there will be testing at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16 based on both centrally devised tests and assessment devised by the schools themselves.

The move towards a National Curriculum was born of misgivings about the quality and nature of the education being given to children. What was being achieved in eleven years of compulsory education? Was it right that for much of the time schools could 'do their own thing' with little or no accountability to the general public whose taxes financed the whole enterprise? Many were deeply concerned about standards within schools and there was a widespread feeling (backed by little or no evidence) that children's attainment, particularly in reading and writing was falling. In such a climate the move towards a more centrally determined

curriculum with regular assessment to determine progress was perhaps inevitable. But there were those who from the start expressed disquiet at the prospect of the central government laying down the content and assessment pattern for teachers and pupils; and this disquiet was particularly acute amongst historians. Would not the subject be made into a political pawn, subject to the whims and fancies of each succeeding Secretary of State?

In January 1989 the then Secretary of State, Mr. Kenneth Baker, personally appointed eleven men and women to form a history working group. Their task was precisely defined and followed the framework already adopted by other working groups. They had to define the Attainment Targets - the skills, concepts and knowledge - with which the History Curriculum for the 5 to 16 age group was to be concerned. Such Attainment Targets would be the focus of assessment at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 (the four Key Stages) and for each AT progress would be determined on a progressive ten point scale, with a Statement of Attainment for each point. Attainment Targets would be grouped together for reporting purposes under Profile Components. Assessment therefore was to be on the basis of criterion referencing; progress was to be determined against clear-cut criteria, not by comparison of one pupil's performance against another's. Attainment Targets and the Statements of Attainment for each AT were therefore to be the backbone of the National Curriculum and the means by which a pupil's progress would be assessed. They would operate within clearly defined Programmes of Study which would lay down the content to be taught at each of the four Key Stages. The working group was also told to consider the issue of assessment techniques, the ways in which history should be taught to pupils with Special Educational Needs (for example, those with physical handicap or learning difficulties), the links that history has with other subjects and the ways in

which the concerns of multi-culturalism and equal opportunities could be met.

What a formidable undertaking! Within a year the working group had to map out an entire curriculum for the years of compulsory schooling which would gain the support of teachers and meet not only the many often conflicting requirements for a balance between local, national, European and world history but also define the ways in which pupils' skills and understanding in history develop between the ages of 5 and 16. In the event one must applaud their energy and the report that was finally published in April 1990 even though many of us have serious reservations about the feasibility of teaching and assessing such a course. Their report is now with the National Curriculum Council and will be widely debated (and possibly changed) before Statutory Orders are introduced and the teaching of the new curriculum commences in September 1991.

The working group has laid down four Attainment Targets. AT1 is 'Understanding History in its Setting'; AT2 'Understanding Points of View and Interpretations'; AT3 'Acquiring and Evaluating History Information'; and AT4 'Organising and Communicating the Results of Historical Study'. They have grouped all four under one Profile Component which they call 'Historical Knowledge, Skills and Understanding'. I find the descriptions of these targets confusing and unhelpful. The first seems tautologous, 'understanding that history is history'. It is only when one reads the gloss that it becomes clear that the AT is concerned with the time element in history - chronology, change, cause and effect. AT2 is equally confusing; it seems to be dealing with empathy (the ability to understand different points of view in the past) and historiography. In fact the AT is simply focusing on historiography and showing pupils that the story of the past is not a once-and-for-all affair or an official version to be

learned but is constantly being reinterpreted. Now the motive behind this Attainment Target is worthy and is clearly warning government ministers against interfering with what is taught. But I do wonder whether the majority of pupils, particularly the younger ones, will really be able to cope with this target. AT3 is sloppily worded. It's obviously concerned with the ways in which historical understanding is created from sources of evidence; but throughout the gloss which accompanies the target there is a confusion between the words 'information', 'evidence' and 'source'. Finally, AT4 is something of a catch-all target which inevitable permeates all the Attainment Targets. It's difficult to see how in assessment one could distinguish between the act of communication and what is being communicated<sup>a</sup>.

The working group gets into even deeper water when trying to determine the Statements of Attainment at ten levels for each of the four ATs. They have (wisely I feel) eschewed the testing of discrete pieces of knowledge at ten separate levels; this would be tantamount to saying that earlier history is easier than later; it would create rigidity through the selection of particular facts for testing; the selection of such facts would inevitably be arbitrary. Rather, they argue that pupils will have to use information in order to demonstrate their understanding of a particular Attainment Target at any given level. But here the trouble starts, for many of us are finding difficulty in seeing where there is progression between one Statement of Attainment and a higher one. Take for example the SoA for AT3 (acquiring and evaluating historical information). Part of the level 4 SoA, which a pupils aged 8 or 9 might reach, reads 'drawing on the historical information in the programmes of study, pupils should be able to compare the value of some sources concerned with an historical issue'. The level 7 SoA for the same AT, which might be reached by a fourteen-year-old, reads '....should be able to recognise that the value of sources is

determined largely by the questions asked about the evidence' (a nice example of the confusion between the words 'source' and 'evidence'). Now the key issue here surely is the nature of the tasks devised to test this particular Attainment Target. I could envisage teaching a lesson to seven or eight-year-olds in which they were determining the value of, say, Victorian domestic objects in giving us understanding of nineteenth century social life; a demanding lesson for fourteen-year-olds would be one looking at a number of testimonies on Auschwitz for determining their value in learning about the holocaust.

It is I think particularly easy to be critical about the Attainment Targets and their associated Statements of Attainment; there has been little research done on the map of children's historical understanding and the way it develops, and the working group inevitably had to rely on hunch and experience. With the programmes of study, however, they were on firmer ground as there has been much debate and development over the past twenty years or so. The group has created a formula for each of its History Study Units which will lead to a balance between political, economic, technological and scientific, social and religious and cultural and aesthetic information. Broadly speaking, the group then proposes that at Key Stage 1 (pupils aged 5 to 7) the approach should be very flexible and the aim should be to introduce pupils to the idea of time, and to people viewed in an historical dimension. Prescription sets in at Key Stage 2 (pupils aged 7 to 11). Three HSUs cover a broad sweep of British history from early times to the nineteenth century or the present; ancient civilizations (Egypt and Greece), explorations and encounters c1450 to c1550 and, for example, ships and seafarers and food and farming through history have to be studied together with three other units devised under strict guidelines by the school itself. One of these School Designed Units must focus on local history. This is an immense syllabus to cope with

and many primary teachers feel despair. It's a feeling I would echo when I look at the Programmes of Study for Key Stage 3 - pupils aged from 11 to 14. Again there's a mighty sweep of British history 1066 to 1900; a study of the Roman Empire; four further units to be chosen from four groups of topics covering an aspect of British history, European history, a non-European civilization, an aspect of the history of the Americas; a School Designed Unit based on a long term theme in British history. I tried breaking down the amount of time I would want to teach the History Study Unit entitled 'Medieval Realms: c1066 to c.1500'. Each Study Unit is meant to last for a term, the average length of which is twelve weeks. Given two thirty-five minute periods for teaching history each week, I would want at least thirteen weeks to cover properly six of the fourteen topics listed in this HSU! All my experience as a history teacher makes me convinced that trying to cover too much and thus teaching at a high level of generality is counterproductive.

At the age of fourteen pupils enter Key Stage 4 and a course which leads to the national examination at sixteen, the General Certificate of Secondary Education. To date there has been considerable choice and flexibility; this will all be changed under the National Curriculum. A rigid diet of twentieth century British and world history has been laid down; every pupil must study one non-European civilization in the 20th century; there is to be one School Designed Unit based on revisiting British history, studied over a long time-span, starting at least before 1500 and reaching up to the present.

The sheer quantity of material, therefore, to be covered is daunting; and there are signs that this will be paired down before the statutory orders are issued. Yet I must give credit to the working group for the attempts they have made to get some balance into the curriculum not only in terms of

local, national, European and world history, but by giving due weight to the position of women and ethnic minorities.

The rest of the report can be quickly dealt with. The chapter on assessment gives little guidance as to how the formidable task of testing at 7, 11, 14 and 16 is to be conducted; it merely highlights the immense difficulties of assessing the entire ability range, including those with Special Educational Needs. The government will no doubt be appointing a group to begin the task of developing the tests which will show progress over ten levels for each of the Attainment Targets. There's a splendid chapter on 'Bringing History to Life' which talks about the use of drama and role play in teaching and the importance of museums, archive collections, oral history, radio, TV and films. We all of course agree with this but with money for resources tighter than ever and with such an immense syllabus to cover one wonders whether this is no more than wishful thinking. In a final chapter the working group considers the relationship of history to the rest of the school curriculum. Here all the right noises are made about the cross-curricular links which can be forged and the ways in which history is a house in which many subjects meet. But good intentions can be a far cry from the realities of the classroom and teachers faced with the need to deliver a curriculum made up of discrete, single subjects against subject specific Attainment Targets may have little time or energy to consider the issue of interdisciplinary enquiry.

It may seem that I have been unduly critical of the National Curriculum as proposed by the history working group. I am well aware that history has now been given a secure place in schools and that all pupils from 1991 onwards will study history to the age of sixteen - last year over sixty per cent gave it up at the age of fourteen. And I can see too the great advantage of having a common framework, a common language and a progressive and coherent course for the

compulsory years of schooling. Nevertheless, I am concerned about a syllabus which as it stands is too large to be covered except in a superficial way and a system of assessment which is frequent and tied to a series of statements of attainment which are not genuinely progressive. Maybe however the genius of the teacher to mould an unteachable syllabus to his or her own requirements will operate; and the huge edifice of assessment will simply prove unworkable. Who knows? It might even stimulate some new research.

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Ehrung für PD Dr. Dieter Tiemann

Seitens der Hamburger Stiftung F.V.S. wurde unserm engagierten Mitglied, Privatdozent Dr. Dieter Tiemann, Universität Dortmund, ein Anteil des Straßburg-Preises für seine Habilitationsschrift zuerkannt. Diese vielbeachtete wissenschaftliche Schrift befaßt sich mit den französisch-deutschen Jugendbeziehungen in den 20<sup>er</sup> und 30<sup>er</sup> Jahren unseres Jahrhunderts. Die Preisverleihungsfeier fand am 6. Oktober 1990 in Straßburg statt.

Dr. Tiemann betreut in der Internationalen Bibliographie Didaktik der Geschichte die Geschichtsdidaktik Frankreichs; in diesem Heft berichtet Kollege Vathke über eine von Dr. Tiemann initiierte und geleitete Tagung. Eine aus Frankreich angebotene Gastprofessur hat ihn in den letzten Monaten leider gehindert, ein Angebot auf nähere Mitarbeit an dieser Zeitschrift anzunehmen. Nach Abschluß der Gastprofessur kommen wir gerne auf dieses Angebot zurück!

Vorstand und Redaktion sprechen Herrn Dozenten Dr. Tiemann zu der verdienten Ehrung die herzlichsten Glückwünsche aus! Pe