

The National Curriculum: History, an interim report by Charles Hannam

There are now legal requirements to establish a National Curriculum in England and Wales. The outlines were set out in the Education Reform Act of 1988 and for History a working party has been set up. It will give interim advice by the end of June 1989 and final advice after consultation by December 1989. By the autumn of 1991 attainment targets and programmes for the study of History in schools - that is in the schools controlled by the state - will have been introduced.

By law every school will be required to provide a basic curriculum which has 'core subjects' these are English, Mathematics and Science. There are also foundation subjects and History is one of them. In the first place there is a sense of relief that History has not been dropped completely and that it has a place in the sun. It can happen that subjects disappear: classics was one example. Among teacher trainers and History specialists there had been some anxiety, particularly when it was noticed that fewer pupils take the subject at Advanced level.

The Secretary for Education said "The study of history is the foundation stone of citizenship and democracy. That is why it is an essential part of the National Curriculum. Knowledge and understanding of the past can help children to make sense of the present. The skills and values it promotes will be important for their future adult lives. We have rich resources of heritage on which to draw. I look to the History Working Group to stimulate real enthusiasm for the study of history: to make it exciting, but also challenging."

At first sight unexceptional sentiments, but it is the first time that teachers in England and Wales have been told by government what to teach and it would be a very good idea to look closely at what has been said. It would seem to be a call for heritage or 'drum and trumpet' history, and instruction to be patriotic and nationally cohesive rather than analytical, critical or becoming a citizen not only of Europe but the whole world. What is left out is often more significant than what is actually put on paper. All those who work under authoritarian governments are good at spotting the deeper implications. "Selection confers status, omission implicitly, if not intentionally, diminishes. Content contains lurking value judgments. Not only the Celts, but women, the poor, minority groups, British Blacks and British Moslems often had their histories misunderstood, distorted, patronised or ignored." (Slater)

If Heritage History wins the day, and it seems quite likely when we look at the composition of the working party, some of us fear that there may be a neglect of social history and world history. (Ward). As a teacher trainer it has always been my major concern that our subject should be allowed to go much further than the narrow narrative approach of the learning of inert facts. History has often been labelled as 'boring' and rated low on the subject popularity scale because of this. If the working party does not get it right we will be in danger of becoming a subsidiary branch of the National Tourist Board.

The National Curriculum will aim to provide teachers with clear objectives for their teaching, children with identifiable targets for their learning; parents with accurate, accessible information about what their children learn, can be expected to know, understand and be able to do, and what they actually achieve. There is sense in the sentiments: schools in the past have been reluctant to reveal much information to parents; teaching individual subjects

has ranged from the very good and imaginative to the abysmally dull and mechanical. It is no use attacking the National Curriculum because it tries to create some systematic schemes of work; we can expect that some part of the curriculum will be left to the discretion of teachers and their faculties. However there will be tests of pupils at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16. Tests may help the teacher to find out whether what has been taught has also been remembered but we also know from past history in schools that testing and supervision by an inspectorate produces factual teaching, rote learning at the expense of imagination and critical abilities

The question of content continues to worry: who goes in and who stays out ? Ancient Greece and Imperial Rome used to be in the secondary school curriculum and as Classics is rarely taught now, they should remain. The question will be, which Greece, Sparta or Athens which Rome? not just the military part which made some of our history teaching seem as if we were preparing our pupils for Sandhurst. Anyway, what of China or the Latin Americas? the more control and testing, the less time will be available for new subjects and new areas for exploration.

I find it significant that the control of the curriculum is directed at the state schools and that the independent sector can carry on as its schools wish. Mass testing for state schools and the independent schools can spend time on developing the scope of their history teaching. In the end it will be quite clear where the better teaching can take place and I can already hear the triumphant claim 'there you are, we knew all along that comprehensive schools were not good enough for the more able pupils'. Perhaps it would be fairer to wait until the History Working Party reports and we can see what is accepted by the government and what is rejected. The fate of the English and Mathematics report have done nothing to reduce my anxieties.

To re-phrase Tacitus: When they make a wilderness they call it 'reform' (peace!) Ubi Solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant (Tacitus, Agricola 30).

Dpt of Education & Science Circular 5/89 22.Feb 1989

Dpt of Education & Science National Curriculum. From Policy to Practice
Ward, C. What is going to happen to yesterday. Times Educational Supplement
31.3.89

Slater, J. Pastmasters. The guardian. 25.4.89

Simon, B. Bending the Rules. Lawrence & Wishart. London 1988