

A Research Agenda

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

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The school curriculum is a social artifact, conceived of and made for deliberate human purposes. The supreme paradox, therefore, is that many accounts of schooling have treated the written curriculum, this most manifest of social constructions, as a given. Moreover, these accounts have compounded the problem by treating the written curriculum as a neutral given embedded in an otherwise meaningful, complex situation. Yet in our own schooling we know that while we loved some subjects, topics, or lessons, we hated others. Some we learned easily and willingly; others we rejected wholeheartedly. Sometimes the variable was the teacher, or the time, or the room, or us, but often it was the form or content of the curriculum itself. Beyond these individualistic responses are, of course, significant collective responses to curriculum, and again, the patterns revealed suggest that the school curriculum is far from a neutral factor.

Why, then, has the making of curriculum received so little attention? We have a social construction that sits at the heart of the process we use to educate our children. Yet in spite of the patchy exhortations of sociologists, sociologists of knowledge in particular, we look in vain for serious study of the process of social construction that emanates as curriculum. Two specific aspects account for this lacuna in our educational studies: the nature of curriculum as a *source* for study, and questions relating to the *methods* we use in approaching the study of curriculum.

In this article, I deal with some problems involved in using curriculum as a source. Many accounts of schooling firmly accept the curriculum as a given, an inevitable and essentially unimportant variable. Of course, the field of curriculum studies and some important work in the sociology of knowledge has continued to challenge this kind of curriculum myopia.

But once we accept that the curriculum itself is an important source for study, further problems surface. *The curriculum* is a perennially elusive and multifaceted concept. The curriculum is such a slippery concept because it is defined, redefined, and negotiated at various levels and arenas. Deciding the

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critical points in the continuing negotiations is impossible. In addition, the terrain differs substantially according to local or national structures and patterns. In this shifting and unfocused terrain, it is plainly problematic to try to define common ground for our study. After all, if there is a lacuna in our study, it is likely to be for good reasons.

The substantial difficulties do not, however, mean that we should ignore the area of curriculum completely or focus on "minute particulars" that are amenable to focused study. We can resolve part of the problem if we identify common ground or some areas of stability within the apparent fluidity and flux of curriculum.

SCHOOL SUBJECTS FROM THE 1960s TO THE 1980s

Much of the most important scholarship on curriculum, certainly on curriculum as a social construction, took place in the 1960s and early '70s, a period of change and flux everywhere in the Western world—and nowhere more so than in the world of schooling in general and curriculum in particular. For this burgeoning of critical curriculum scholarship to happen during these times was both encouraging and in a sense symptomatic. The emergence of a field of study of curriculum as social construction was an important new direction. But though itself symptomatic of a period of social questioning and criticism, this burgeoning of critical scholarship was not without its downside.

That downside has two important aspects as we begin to reconstitute our study of schooling and curriculum. First, influential scholars in the field have often taken a value position, assuming that schooling should be reformed, root and branch—"revolutionized," "the maps of learning redrawn." Second, when this scholarship took place, a wide range of curriculum-reform movements were seeking to revolutionize school curriculums on both grounds. Therefore, these scholars probably would not wish to focus on, let alone concede, the areas of stability, of unchallengeable high ground, that may have existed in the school curriculum.

In the 1960s, curriculum reform became a tidal wave. Everywhere the waves created turbulence, but ultimately the reforms engulfed only a few small islands; more substantial land masses hardly felt the effects at all, and on dry land, the mountains, the high ground, remained completely untouched. As the tide now rapidly recedes, the high ground stands in stark silhouette. If nothing else, our scrutiny of curriculum reform should allow us to recognize that the world of curriculum has both high ground and common ground.

Standing out more clearly than ever in the new horizon is the school subject, the "basic" or "traditional" subjects. Throughout the Western world we find exhortation as well as evidence about a "return to basics," a reembrace of traditional subjects. In England, for instance, the new National Curriculum defines a range of subjects to be taught as a core curriculum in all schools.

The subjects bear an uncanny resemblance to the list generally defined as secondary school subjects in the 1904 regulations. The *London Times Educational Supplement* comments on this return of traditional subject dominance: "The first thing to say about this whole exercise is that it unwinds 80 years of English (and Welsh) educational history. It is a case of go back to go."¹

In the early years of the 19th century, the first state secondary schools were organized. The National Board of Education, under the detailed guidance of Sir Robert Morant, presented its curriculum:

The course should provide for instruction in the English Language and Literature, at least one Language other than English, Geography, History, Mathematics, Science and Drawing, with due provision for Manual Work and Physical Exercises, and in a girls' school for Housewifery. Not less than 4½ hours per week must be allotted to English, Geography and History; not less than 3½ hours to the Language where one is taken or less than 6 hours where two are taken; and not less than 7½ hours to Science and Mathematics, of which at least 3 must be for Science.²

In looking at the new 1987 National Curriculum, however, we find that "the 8–10 Subject timetable which the discussion paper draws up has as academic a look to it as anything Sir Robert Morant could have dreamed up"³ Similarly, in scrutinizing curriculum history in the U.S. high school, Kliebard has pointed to the saliency of traditional school subjects in the face of waves of curriculum-reform initiatives from earlier decades. He characterizes the school subject in the U.S. high school curriculum as "the impregnable fortress."⁴

In the 1960s and '70s, critical studies of curriculum as social construction pointed to the school classroom as the site where the curriculum was negotiated and realized. The classroom was the "centre of action," "the arena of resistance." In this view, what went on in the classroom *was* the curriculum. The definition of *curriculum*—the view from the high ground and the mountains—was not just subject to redefinition at the classroom level but was simply irrelevant.

Now, we cannot sustain this standpoint for beginning to study curriculum. Certainly, the high ground of the written curriculum is subject to renegotiation at lower levels, notably the classroom. But the view, common in the 1960s, that the written curriculum is therefore irrelevant is less common today. Again, we are coming to see that the high ground, our common ground, is important. In the high ground, what is basic and traditional is reconstituted and reinvented. The given status of knowledge of school subjects is thus reinvented and reasserted. But this status is more than political maneuvering or rhetoric; this reassertion affects the discourse about schooling and relates to the

¹"1904 and All That," *London Times Educational Supplement* (July 31, 1987), p. 2.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 269.

"parameters of practice." In the 1990s, it would be folly to ignore the central importance of controlling and defining the written curriculum. In a significant sense, the written curriculum is the visible and public testimony of selected rationales and legitimating rhetorics for schooling:

[The written curriculum] both promulgates and underpins certain basic intentions of schooling as they are operationalized in structures and institutions. To take a common convention in preactive curriculum, the school subject: while the written curriculum defines the rationales and rhetoric of the subject, this is the only tangible aspect of a patterning of resources, finances and examinations and associated material and career interests. In this symbiosis, it is as though the written curriculum provides a guide to the legitimating rhetoric of schooling as they are promoted through patterns of resource allocation, status attribution and career distribution. In short, the written curriculum provides us with a testimony, a documentary source, a changing map of the terrain: it is also one of the best official guide books to the institutionalized structure of schooling.⁵

The written curriculum, notably the convention of the school subject, has here both symbolic and practical significance—symbolic in that certain intentions for schooling are thus publicly signified and legitimated; practical in that these written conventions are rewarded with finance and resource allocation and thus with associated work and career benefits.⁶

Our study of the written curriculum should afford a range of insights into schooling. But we must ally the study with other kinds of study—in particular, studies of school process, of school texts, and of the history of pedagogy. For schooling comprises the interlinked matrix of these studies and, indeed, other vital ingredients. On schooling and on curriculum in particular, we must finally ask, Who gets what, and what do they do with it?

The definition of curriculum is part of this story. That definition is not the same as asserting a direct or easily discernible relationship between the preactive definition of written curriculum and its interactive realization in classrooms. The definition, however, asserts that the written curriculum most often sets important parameters for classroom practice (not always, not at all times, not in all classrooms, but most often). The study of written curriculum will first increase our understanding of the influences and interests active at the preactive level. Second, this understanding will further our knowledge of the values and purposes represented in schooling and how preactive definition, notwithstanding individual and local variations, may set parameters for interactive realization and negotiation in the classroom and school.

Finally, we should end with studies of how the preactive relates to the interactive. But for the moment so neglected is the study of the preactive definition of written curriculum that no such marriage of methodologies

⁵Ivor F. Goodson, *The Making of Curriculum—Collected Essays* (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1988), p. 16.

⁶For more on patterns of finance and resources for teachers, see Ivor F. Goodson, *School Subjects and Curriculum Change* (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1987).

could be consummated. The first step is plainly to undertake a range of studies of the definitions of written curriculum and, in particular, to focus on the impregnable fortress of the school subject.

THE EXAMPLE OF ENGLAND IN THE 1980s: RECONSTITUTING SCHOOL SUBJECTS

Traditionally in England, those stressing "the basics" have referred to the 3 R's—reading, writing, and arithmetics. In the 1980s, those with curriculum power have followed a new version of the 3 R's—rehabilitation, reinvention, and reconstitution. Often, the rehabilitation strategy for school subjects takes the form of arguing that good teaching is in fact good *subject* teaching. This strategy seeks to draw a veil over the whole experience of the 1960s, to forget that many curriculum reforms were developed as antidotes to the perceived failures and inadequacies of conventional subject teaching. In this sense, the rehabilitation strategy is quintessentially ahistorical, but paradoxically it is also a reminder of the power of vestiges of the past to survive, revive, and reproduce.

In England, the reinvention of traditional subjects began in 1969 with the first collection of *Black Papers*.⁷ The writers of this collection argue that progressive theories of education—the integration of subjects, mixed-ability teaching, and inquiry and discovery teaching—have too greatly influenced teachers. So teachers have neglected subject teaching and basic skill teaching, and reduced standards of pupil achievement and school discipline have resulted; the traditional subject has become equated with social and moral discipline. Rehabilitating the traditional subject promises to reestablish discipline in both these senses.

Politicians took up the *Black Papers*, and in 1976 Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan embraced many of the themes in his Ruskin speech. Specific recommendations soon followed. After a survey of secondary schools in England and Wales, Her Majesty's Inspectorate drew attention to what it judged to be evidence of an insufficient match in many schools between the qualification and experience of teachers and the work they were undertaking.⁸ A later survey of middle schools found that when examining "the proportion of teaching which was undertaken by teachers who had studied the subjects they taught as main subjects in initial training . . . higher standards of work overall were associated with a greater degree of use of subject teachers."⁹

⁷C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, eds., *Black Papers, 1-3* (London: Critical Quarterly Society, 1969-1970). Others followed: C. B. Cox and R. Boyson, eds., *Black Paper, 1975. The Fight for Education* (London: Dent, 1975); *Black Paper, 1977* (London: Temple Smith, 1977).

⁸Department of Education and Science, *9-13 Middle Schools. An Illustrative Survey* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983).

⁹*Ibid.*, para. 3.19.

In a 1983 pamphlet, *Teaching Quality*, the Secretary of State for Education listed the criteria for initial teacher-training courses. The first criteria imposed the following requirement: "that the higher education and initial training of all qualified teachers should include at least two full years' course time devoted to subject studies at a level appropriate to higher education."¹⁰ This requirement, therefore, "would recognize teachers' needs for subject expertise if they are to have the confidence and ability to enthuse pupils and respond to their curiosity in their chosen subject fields."¹¹

This final comment is curiously circular. Obviously, if pupils choose subjects, then teachers will probably require subject expertise. But should pupils choose subjects? We have here a political *fait accompli* presented as choice. In fact, students have no choice but to embrace their chosen subject fields. The political rehabilitation of subjects by political dictate is presented as a response to pupil choice.

Teaching Quality also questions the match between teachers' qualifications and their work with pupils. We learn that "the Government attaches high priority to improving the fit between teachers' qualifications and their tasks as one means of improving the quality of education."¹² The criteria for the fit is based on a clear belief in the sequential and hierarchical pattern of subject learning. All specialist subject teaching during the secondary phase requires that teachers' subject study was at a level appropriate to higher education, represented a substantial part of the higher education and training period, and was built on a suitable A-level base.

When scrutinizing non-subject-based work in schools, we clearly find the belief in subject specialization. Many aspects of schoolwork take place outside (or beside) subject work, studies of school process have indeed shown how integrated pastoral and remedial work originates because pupils, for whatever reason, do not achieve in traditional subjects. Far from accepting the subject as an educational vehicle with severe limits if the intention is to educate all pupils, Hargreaves advocates rehabilitating subjects even in domains that often originate from subject fallout:

Secondary teaching is not all subject based, and initial training and qualifications cannot provide an adequate preparation for the whole range of secondary school work. For example, teachers engaged in careers or remedial work or in providing group courses of vocational preparation, and those given the responsibility for meeting "special needs" in ordinary schools, need to undertake these tasks not only on the basis of initial qualifications but after experience of teaching a specialist subject and preferably after appropriate post-experience training. Work of this kind and the teaching of interdisciplinary studies are normally best shared among teachers with varied and appropriate specialist qualifications and expertise.¹³

¹⁰Department of Education and Science, *Teaching Quality* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983).

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., para. 3.40.

¹³Andy Hargreaves, *Curricular Policy and the Culture of Teaching: Some Prospects for the Future* (mimeograph, 1984).

Rehabilitating school subjects has become the mainstay of the British government's thinking about the school curriculum. In many ways, the governmental and structural support offered to school subjects as the organizing device for secondary schooling is reaching unprecedented levels. According to Hargreaves, "More than at any time previously, it seems, the subject is to take an overriding importance in the background preparation and curricular responsibility of secondary school teachers."¹⁴ But the preferred policy sits alongside a major change in the style of governing education:

Nor does that intention on the part of H.M.I. and D.E.S. amount to just a dishing out of vague advice. Rather, in a style of centralized policy intervention and review with which we in Britain are becoming increasingly familiar in the 1980's, it is supported by strong and clear declarations of intent to build the achievement of subject match into the criteria for approval (or not) of teacher training courses, and to undertake five yearly reviews of selected secondary schools to ensure that subject match is being improved within them and is being reflected in the pattern of teacher appointments.¹⁵

The associated issue of increasingly centralized control also comes up in *Education 8 to 12 in Combined and Middle Schools. An H.M.I. Survey*.¹⁶ Again, a section on the need to "extend teachers' subject knowledge" rehearses the rehabilitation of school subjects. Rowland sees the document as "part of an attempt to bring a degree of centralized control over education." He states, "*Education 8 to 12* may well be interpreted by teachers and others as recommending yet another means in the trend towards a more schematicized approach to learning in which the focus is placed even more firmly on the subject matter rather than the child."¹⁷ He adds cryptically, "The evidence it produces, however, points to the need to move in quite the opposite direction."¹⁸ His reservations about the effects of rehabilitating school subjects are widely shared. Hargreaves has noted that one effect of the strategy "will be to reinforce the existing culture of secondary teaching and thereby inhibit curricular and pedagogic innovation on a school-wide front."¹⁹

The various British government initiatives and reports since 1976 have shown a consistent tendency to return to basics and to reembrace traditional subjects. This project, spanning both Labour and Conservative administrations, has culminated in the "new" National Curriculum. A consultation document, *National Curriculum, 5-16*, defines the curriculum. In November 1987, in the wake of the Conservatives' third successive election victory, the Education Reform Bill was introduced in the House of Commons. It defines certain

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Department of Education and Science, *Education 8 to 12 in Combined and Middle Schools An H.M.I. Survey* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1985).

¹⁷Stephen Rowland, "Where Is Primary Education Going?" *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 19 (January-February 1987): 90

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Andy Hargreaves, *Curricular Policy and the Culture of Teaching. Some Prospects for the Future* (mimeograph, 1984).

common curricular elements that are to be offered to pupils of compulsory school age—"the national curricular."

Although presented as a striking new political initiative, comparison with the 1904 regulations shows a remarkable degree of historical continuity. The 1987 National Curriculum comprises the "core" subjects of mathematics, English, and science and the "foundation" subjects of history, geography, technology, music, art, physical education, and (for secondary pupils) a modern foreign language.²⁰

CONCLUSION

After the frustrating results of curriculum-reform efforts in the 1960s and their substantial dismantling and reversal in the 1980s, the arguments for historical study are now considerable indeed. Great Britain provides ample instances of the contemporary powers of those vestiges of the past, traditional school subjects. Thus, arguing for curricular change strategies that ignore history would surely be improbable, if not impossible. Yet curricular activists and theorists in the 20th century have largely assumed this posture. Now, we must place historical study at the center of the curriculum enterprise; we must exhume the early work on curricular history, and the spasmodic subsequent work, and we must systematically rehabilitate the historical study of school subjects.

Fortunately, this seems a good time to launch such a research agenda in North America. Some excellent studies now provide a basis for extending our understanding. Herbert Kliebard's *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* introduces the subject.²¹ George Tompkins's *A Common Countenance. Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum* serves as a basic text.²² The Studies in Curriculum History series is beginning to look at U.S. curriculum history, especially Barry Franklin's *Building the American Community. The School Curriculum and the Search for Social Control* and Barbara Finkelstein's *Governing the Young*.²³ Also, more comparative studies are under

²⁰Department of Education and Science, *The National Curriculum, 5-16* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1987).

²¹Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

²²George Tompkins, *A Common Countenance. Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

²³Edited by Ivor F. Goodson, the Studies in Curriculum History series (Philadelphia: Falmer Press) comprises the following texts: Ivor F. Goodson, ed., *Social Histories of the Secondary Curriculum. Subjects for Study* (1985); Gary McCulloch, Edgar Jenkins, and David Layton, *Technological Revolution? The Politics of School Science and Technology in England and Wales Since 1945* (1985); Barry Cooper, *Renegotiating Secondary School Mathematics: A Study of Curriculum Change and Stability* (1985); Barry Franklin, *Building the American Community: The School Curriculum and the Search for Social Control* (1986); Bob Moon, *The New Maths Curriculum Controversy: An International Story* (1986); Ivor F. Goodson, *School Subjects and Curriculum Change* (1987); Thomas S. Popkewitz, ed., *The Formation of School Subjects: The Struggle for Creating an American Institution* (1987); Brian E. Woolnough, *Physics Teaching in Schools*,

way—for instance, in *Subjects and Schooling*, I compare patterns in the United States, Canada, and Britain.²⁴ All these studies should provide much more information on where our policies on curriculum and schooling have come from and cause us to think again about their appropriateness for contemporary needs.

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1960–85: *Of People, Policy, and Power* (1987); Ivor F. Goodson, *The Making of Curriculum. Collected Essays* (1988); Peter Cunningham, *Curriculum Change in the Primary School Since 1945: Dissemination of the Progressive Ideal* (1988); Peter W. Musgrave, *Whose Knowledge? A Case Study of the Victorian Universities and Schools Examinations Board, 1964–1979* (1988); Barbara Finkelstein, *Governing the Young: Teacher Behavior in Popular Primary Schools in Nineteenth-Century United States* (1989); Gary McCulloch, *The Secondary Technical School. A Usable Past?* (1990).

²⁴Ivor F. Goodson, *Subjects and Schooling* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

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