

Farouk Benabdi, P.h.D.¹

*Faculty of Letters and Languages,
Department of English Language and Literature,
Mascara, Algeria*

The Primary Education Curriculum, Neoliberalism and the Teachers in England (1988-1990s)

Abstract

Prior to 1979, the English primary education curriculum had been the secret garden of the Local Education Authorities, the governing bodies and the teachers. Despite the fact that the State attempted to interfere in this aspect, no direct intervention took place. With the coming of the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher to power in 1979, neoliberalism was introduced to replace the failing Welfare State policy, which affected different sectors, notably the educational one. This was conspicuous in the passing of the 1988 Education Act, which represented the first official intervention of the State in the curriculum. Therefore, the objectives of this article are the following: to discuss the changes that the Act brought to the English primary curriculum, to evaluate whether the primary education curriculum was neoliberal in content, and to tackle the reaction of the teachers towards it. It has been found that the 1988 Education Act contributed to the reshaping of the primary education curriculum, but failed to introduce the Conservative Neoliberal principles in English education. Even worse, it had the impact of infuriating the primary school teachers who organized national protest.

Keywords: Curriculum, neoliberalism, primary education, teachers

1. Introduction

The issue of the primary education curriculum in England has always aroused heated debate given the fact of its importance in education and its particular historical development in England. This topic has been discussed by many historians among them Clyde Chitty, Denis Lawton, Stephen Ward and Christine Eden, Colin Richards and Prof. Norman Thomas. They have notably focused on the context of the foundation of the National Curriculum in England and its development in relationship with primary education. This article has a more specific objective, namely to see whether the primary National Curriculum was neoliberal in content, and to reassess the changes it brought to the primary education curriculum, and its impact on the primary school teachers.

2. Historical Background

To understand the foundation of the National Curriculum in England, it is necessary to shed light on the evolution of the primary education curriculum from the early interference of the State in it in 1862 until the foundation of the National Curriculum in 1988. Colin Richards divides its development into three consecutive periods, and therefore, three types of primary education curriculum: the payment by results curriculum (1862-97), the codified curriculum (1897-1926) and the unregulated curriculum (1926-88). These three types of curriculum were the fruit of the government policies of their periods. For instance, the payment by result curriculum sought to achieve economies in a period of austerity as a result of the Crimean War (1853-56) by reducing the amount of government grants that had before been devoted to elementary education, and to adapt the elementary education curriculum according to the new

¹ Email ; farouk.benabdi@univ-mascara.dz

needs of the English society; this is why it was compulsory and conservative in its content. The codified and unregulated curriculums, which were in the form of issuing government official documents such as codes, reports and pamphlets that would regulate the elementary/primary education curriculum, sought to offer guidelines to LEAs and schools to adapt their curricular policies according to the schools' context. This corresponded to the government policy of decentralization, which aimed at giving more autonomy to the local authorities to take their decisions and elaborate their own policies. (Richards, 1999, pp.53-66)

However, this practice changed when the Conservatives led by Margaret Thatcher won the General Elections in 1979. The new Thatcher Conservative policy sought to replace the failing Welfare State policy by the Neoliberal one in all the aspects of the English life, one of which was education. This was translated into the introduction of neoliberal concepts in the educational debate such as free market, choice and competition. Neo-liberalism was finally introduced in education with the passing of the 1988 Education Act which founded the National Curriculum. (Lawton, 2005, pp.18-70)

3. The National Curriculum and Neoliberalism

According to the 1988 Education Act, the National Curriculum was compulsory and its application common to all the primary schools in England. It was elaborated on a broad subject-basis, with three core subjects and seven foundation subjects. The core subjects included mathematics, English and science, and the foundation subjects comprised history, geography, technology, music and art and physical education. As far as the content of health education and information technology were concerned, they were incorporated in the teaching of the foundation subjects. These subjects were taught through two primary key stages, one from 5 to 7 and the following from 8 to 11. As to Religious Education, the National Curriculum did not consider it as a foundation subject, but it was obligatory for those pupils attending a maintained school. (The Education Act 1988, pp.1-10)

As far as assessment was concerned, the National Curriculum appointed the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (T.G.A.T). Its responsibility was to draft Standard Assessment Tasks (S.A.T.s), or as they were known as National Tests in accordance with the two primary education key stages so as to assess the pupils' individual evolution. According to the National Curriculum, the pupils were forced to take these tests at the end of each stage, and their results were presented through the drafting of reports, which was generally done by the teachers. (The 1988 Education Act, pp.11-13; Thomas, 1990, pp.129-143)

To meet the new requirements of the National Curriculum, Thatcher's Conservative government had also to adapt the training of teachers. As a result, the 1989 Consultation Document proposed new terms of reference for the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (C.A.T.E), and provided it with new criteria. (Lawton, 2005, p.112) This was done with the support of H.M.I, but it was opposed by the Labour Party, and both Houses of Parliament. In fact, it was seen as a statist means to control the teachers' education and training, especially the initial teacher education. (Lawton, 2005, p.112)

However, the intervention of the State in the curriculum through the passing of the 1988 Education Act and the foundation of the National Curriculum did not correspond to the concept of the free market which stipulates that the State does not have to interfere in the regulation of the country's affairs. Moreover, the content of the National Curriculum did not conform to the neoliberal concept of choice. In fact, neoliberalism implies that individuals have the right to choose, which is the opposite of what the National Curriculum stated. It compelled all the primary schools, with their administrators, teachers and pupils, all over the country, to apply the National Curriculum, with its educational stages, its subjects and their content, and its tests. Therefore, the uniformity of the National Curriculum and its application in all the English primary schools did not encourage competition, especially when the creative and innovative

aspect of the teaching profession, and the learning process were removed. (Chitty, 2014, pp.51-54)

Ward and Eden (2009) refer to the existence of this contradiction between the dominating policy of Neo-liberalism of the Thatcher Conservative government (1979-90) and the content of the National Curriculum. They explain this contradiction by considering the foundation of the National Curriculum as a means that the government used in order to reach its neo-liberal objectives. They notably explain that: “the reason for setting up the machinery of a National Curriculum, national testing, school league tables and Ofsted inspection was to allow customers to make their choices. Parents could select on the basis of the schools' test results, positions in league tables and quality of Ofsted reports test results online” (p.21)

Clyde Chitty, in his turn, quotes the passage of one adviser of Margaret Thatcher, Stuart Sexton who minimised the importance of the National Curriculum in the 1988 Education Act. He notably confessed the following:

And it diverted attention away from the really important parts of the legislation. You see the curriculum should be one of the school's selling-points with its own particular consumers...Schools should be able to respond to what they perceive the market is looking for...The National Curriculum undermines what we were trying to achieve. (Chitty, 2014, p.54)

Hence, according to him, the National Curriculum was a distraction rather than the main part of the Act and the Government policy. It was the issue that all the people concerned with education were supposed to concentrate on and to debate about in order to divert them from what was really important and what the government wanted to pass in the 1988 Education Act. (Chitty, 2014, pp.53-54) Naturally, this had repercussions on the world of primary education, especially on the teachers.

4. The Repercussions of the National Curriculum on the Teachers

The teachers complained of overwork and criticised the National Curriculum, in particular, during the period of the Education Secretary, John Mac-Gregor (1989-1990). Their criticism concerned the application of the National Curriculum, and its reliability and validity, and added that it was too detailed, over-prescriptive, managerial and bureaucratic rather than educational and professional. Therefore, they asked for more policy statements and schemes of work to help them plan, teach, learn and assess in their work. (Lawton, 2005, p.104)

During the period of Prime Minister John Major (1990-1997), the National Curriculum began to be gradually overloaded, in particular in the subjects' content and the tests, which hardened the work of the teachers. Furthermore, although the teachers worked hard to apply the National Curriculum and its tests, they came to realise like their pupils, that they were themselves under assessment, and the assessment of the teachers' work was more apparent than that of the pupils. Parallel to this, those teachers, who taught in schools with an important number of pupils having difficulties, were afraid to see their schools to be under classified and to lose public consideration. The teachers were also confronted to the difficulty of supporting and implementing the National Curriculum and its tests, which made them become more and more dissatisfied and call for the abolition of tests. (Chitty, 2014, p.158)

This dissatisfaction and the lack of interest from the part of the government compelled the National Union of Teachers (N.U.T), the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (N.A.S.U.W.T) led by Nigel de Gruchy and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (A.T.L) to organise the Teachers' Boycott in 1993. For them, these tests represented a lot of work for the teachers and for this, they asked for their simplification. As a result, the Prime Minister and his Government felt desperate. (Chitty, 2014, p.162)

Following the 1993 boycott, a commission was appointed and chaired by the Chancellor of Nottingham University, Sir Ron Dearing. Its task was to investigate into the issue of the National Curriculum and its assessment procedures. The recommendations of the Dearing Review were published one year later, which notably comprised the trimming of the content of lessons and the reduction of the time devoted to teaching to eighty percent, permitting teachers to have at least a day per week for them. The final report was accepted by the Education Secretary Gillian Shephard (1994-1997) who threatened that it was the last offer for the teachers. According to Dearing:

The primary purpose of the review at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 should be to slim down the National Curriculum; to make the Orders less prescriptive; and to free some 20% of teaching time for use at the discretion of the school. The review should, therefore, be primarily concerned with dividing the content of the present curriculum Orders between a statutory core and optional material for use at the discretion of the school. The slimming down should take place in the context of curricular objectives for each key stage with all Orders being revised together (Dearing, 1994, p.7)

On the whole, the teachers' boycott was a success in the sense that the proposals mentioned above were accepted by teachers, the Conservative government and the Labour Shadow government. (Chitty, 2014, p.162)

5. Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the National Curriculum did not correspond to the values that Neoliberalism sought to spread given the fact that its main objective was to impose a national uniform curriculum rather than to give choice to schools. For some historians, it was crystal clear that the National Curriculum functioned as a distraction, rather than the main issue of the government policy. However, its impact was negative since it created load of work for the teachers and even the pupils and their parents, which led to opposition and protest, and the demand for reforms.

References

- Chitty, C. (2014). *Education policy in Britain*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dearing, R. (1994). *The dearing report: The national curriculum and its assessment*. Great Britain: Her Majesty's Stationary. Retrieved from: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1994/index.html>
- Lawton, D. (2005). *Education and labour party ideologies 1900-2001 and beyond*. Great Britain: Routledge and Falmer: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Richards, C. (1999). *Primary Education at a Hinge of History?*. Great Britain: Falmer Press: Francis and Taylor Group.
- The Education Act, 1988, Elizabeth II, CH.40. Retrieved from: <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/1988-education-reform-act.html>
- Thomas, N. (1990). *Primary education from Plowden to the 1990s*. Great Britain: the Falmer Press.
- Ward, Stephen, Eden, Christine. (2009). *Key Issues in Education Policy*. Great Britain: Sage.