

## FROM THE SORBONNE TO SURBITON – THE IMPROBABLE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

*Max Coates\**

School-based education in England is deeply flawed in that it does not have a consensual purpose. Is it about education for its own sake or is it a pragmatic enterprise intended to fuel commercial intent? Despite this lack of clarity around its purpose the English system is significantly maintained by holding the feet of its practitioners to the fire of inspection. Research by Altricher and Kemethofer (2015)<sup>1</sup> of seven European-based education systems found that the pressure to do well under inspection was greatest in England and least in Austria and Switzerland. A highly pressured environment within schools makes teachers and school leaders vulnerable to accepting pre-packaged solutions. The list of these is extensive and includes Brain Gym, VAK and Accelerated Learning. The latter was strongly marketed by Alistair Smith (1998),<sup>2</sup> who aggregated a wide range of ‘brain-based’ into a methodological handbook. This was heavily marketed and found a ready audience with schools, packaged with Smith’s high-level presentation skills. Writing in the *Guardian*, Revell (2005)<sup>3</sup> notes:

*In the early 90s, Alistair Smith’s book, Accelerated Learning in the Classroom, kickstarted a great deal of the interest in cognitive approaches to learning, and his lectures continue to sell out. Smith is referenced in the DfES publication, but he now tells the Guardian he has tried to get his earlier work withdrawn from sale.*

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\* Revd. Professor Max Coates DFCOT, MA, BA(Hons), BEd(Hons), SFHEA, Dip. Ed(Adv), FCOT, BCTS, ACP, Cert.Ed.

<sup>1</sup> Altricher, H. and Kemethofer, D. (2015) Does accountability pressure through school inspections promote school improvement? *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. 26 (1) 32–56.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, A. (1998) *Accelerated Learning in Practice*. Stafford, Network Educational Press.

<sup>3</sup> Revell, P. (2005) *Each to their own*. Manchester, The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/may/31/schools.uk3> (Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

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The problem with a ‘guru culture’ and the advice that it offers is summarised by Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996),<sup>4</sup> who argue that:

*It is constitutionally incapable of self-criticism; its terminology usually confuses rather than educates; it rarely rises above basic common sense; and it is faddish and bedevilled by contradictions.* (p. 12)

The story of how the English school curriculum evolved into its contemporary format has often been well rehearsed. Such stylised accounts take us from a classically based education for the elite through to an economically driven and altogether more pragmatic design for all. I would like to suggest, however, that the underlying narrative could actually be construed as chaotic and perhaps even at times even somewhat sinister.

### **YOU COULD ALMOST HEAR A PIN DROP**

Robert Raikes was born in Gloucester in 1736. A newspaper publisher, he also had an interest in prison reform. He was concerned that the adults in the prisons that he visited were often trapped in a cycle of poverty and reoffence.

One day, so the story goes, Raikes was accosted by a washerwoman as he walked down the steps of his printing works. She complained that the swearing of the boys on the Sabbath day made the area sound more like hell than heaven. Many of these youths were employed in the Gloucester pin factories and worked six days a week. In response to the woman’s concerns, Raikes set up a Sunday school. This opened in 1780, the curriculum was the text of the Bible and the outcome was that many of these boys learned to read. His Sunday schools were later extended to include girls.

Raikes was not the only innovator in this area. In 1769 Hannah Ball had preceded him in opening a Sunday school in High Wycombe. However, Raikes undoubtedly provided considerable momentum to the movement, and by 1831 more than a million and a quarter children were receiving an education at Sunday schools, establishing the idea of widespread schooling for all for the first time.

A cursory reading around the history of Raikes’s remarkable achievement in opening up education could easily miss a conundrum. His primary focus was not

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<sup>4</sup> Micklethwait, J., and A. Wooldridge. (1996). *The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of Management Gurus*. New York: Time Books, Random House.

on education for literacy but on securing societal reform. The original schedule for the schools, as written by Raikes was:

*The children were to come after ten in the morning, and stay till twelve; they were then to go home and return at one; and after reading a lesson, they were to be conducted to Church. After Church, they were to be employed in repeating the catechism till after five, and then dismissed, with an injunction to go home without making a noise. (Moses 1907:15)<sup>5</sup>*

There was indeed a drop in the crime rate and the reporting of antisocial behaviour in the City of Gloucester within a short time of the Sunday school opening. His contemporary, the economist Adam Smith, offered a strong advocacy for the movement, stating, ‘No plan has promised to effect a change of manners with equal ease and simplicity since the days of the Apostles.’ (Rae 1907:98)<sup>6</sup> So what’s not to like? I would suggest that the issue is around subjugating the purpose of education to behavioural management. The curriculum, in turn, becomes framed around social engineering.

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence remains a contested issue within both society as a whole and in education in particular. At its heart is the debate around the relative impact of nature and nurture. Is it that some people have a brain analogous to having an Intel Core i7 whilst others have to make do with a processor from a recycled Commodore 64? Few things can shape education more profoundly than how we understand human intelligence. If we see intelligence as fixed, then we are likely to lower our sights and go for a maintenance mode. However, if we believe in neural plasticity and consider that education can build both capability and capacity, our expectations will undergo a seismic shift.

Sir Cyril Burt (1881–1971) achieved prominence in British psychological circles. He was elected as President of the British Psychological Society in 1942 and became the first psychologist to be knighted. He became the ‘go to’ authority in the UK on intelligence. However, he took an entrenched position on IQ, arguing that it was fundamentally innate. Early in his career, in 1909, he noticed that upper-class children in private preparatory schools did better in IQ tests than children in ordinary elementary schools. He concluded that rich children scored

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<sup>5</sup> Moses, M. J. (1907) *Children’s Books and Reading*. New York, Mitchell Kennerley

<sup>6</sup> Rae, J. (1895). *Life of Adam Smith*. London & New York: Macmillan & Co.

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better than poor children in such tests, because intelligence was inherited and those rich children in private schools had more intelligent parents than the disadvantaged children in the elementary schools (Mackintosh 1995).<sup>7</sup>

There were family connections with the eugenicist Francis Galton. Burt was certainly drawn to Galton's studies in statistics and individual differences. Galton was based at University College London (UCL) and Burt was subsequently at the nearby Institute of Education, itself now part of UCL. As an institution they are trying to deal with the legacy of Galton's views on eugenics. Their commissioned inquiry commented that:

*The Inquiry focused on race, as per our terms of reference. However, as the work progressed it became apparent that ableism and classism were also core ideas in Galton's eugenics. While Commission members disagreed on the meaning and role of race in his eugenics, all agreed that at least these two other groups targeted in his writings – the disabled and the working class – should be included in the Inquiry. There is of course some overlap: BAME and disabled persons are over-represented in low-income households. That said, we acknowledge that eugenics targeted many groups, and again invite others to illuminate the harm done by eugenics to the lives of these additional groups, for example persons with low socioeconomic status, travelling communities or sexual and religious minorities. (Solanke et al. 2020:10)<sup>8</sup>*

With Burt influenced by Galton, he continued his research with what is best described as a severe myopic ontology. His later work involved homozygous twin studies, with 53 pairs of twins who had been separated in early life. This is where the problems begin to emerge.

After his death in 1971, his work was revisited by a number of researchers, and significant doubts were expressed about the reliability and validity of his work. The arguments are statistically complex. However, Mackintosh (1995), then Emeritus Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge, summed up the evidence against Burt, stating that the data Burt presented were so woefully inadequate and riddled with error that consequently no reliance could be placed on the numbers he presented (p. 67). This is resonant with others who have examined Burt's data such as Kamin (1974)<sup>9</sup> and Gillie (1976)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Mackintosh, N. J. (1995), *Cyril Burt: fraud or framed?*, Oxford University Press

<sup>8</sup> Solanke, I. (Chair) (2020) *Inquiry into the History of Eugenics at UCL – Final Report*, London, UCL

<sup>9</sup> Kamin, L. J. (1974). *The science and politics of I.Q.* New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>10</sup> Gillie, O. (1977). "Did Sir Cyril Burt Fake His Research on Heritability of Intelligence? Part I". *The Phi Delta Kappan*. 58 (6): 469–71

There was a fascinating twist. Burt had two collaborators in his research: Margaret Howard and J. Conway. Publications attributed to these two were published in a journal edited by Burt between 1952 and 1959, including a joint paper by Burt and Howard. People close to Burt, including his housekeeper, could not recall either of these two individuals. Gillie (1977) concluded that neither Howard nor Conway actually existed.

Burt was extremely influential in advocating IQ-type testing at eleven and so allocating children to a 'suitable' educational context. Burt's research underpinned the persistence of selective education and the disparity of approach between grammar and secondary modern schools and the damaging consequences of such a process in lowering and even destroying the academic outcomes for many thousands of young people and the legacy that they took from that into adult life. In essence, we built a post-war education system on the work of a man who achieved entry into the *Guardian* list of scientific frauds, alongside the fabricator of the Piltdown Man (Clarfeldt 2006).<sup>11</sup> Surely at the best that is embarrassing and at the worst a cause for national shame. It maybe that, following UCL's acquisition of Burt's employer, the Institute of Education, they might wish to include him as a codicil in their recently published inquiry into eugenics?

## FROM THE SORBONNE TO SURBITON

In England the current dispensation of accountability can be traced back to the Great Debate. This was initiated when the then prime minister, James Callaghan, challenged the teaching professions in a major speech delivered at Ruskin College in 1976:

*To the teachers I would say that you must satisfy the parents and industry that what you are doing meets their requirements and the needs of our children. For if the public is not convinced then the profession will be laying up trouble for itself in the future. (Callaghan, 2010)<sup>12</sup>*

Over the years there has been speculation as to why Callaghan laid out his stall in this way. Some have suggested that his comments were made in the wake of the 1974 oil crisis when a sudden rise in the price of crude oil caused anxiety over the country's economic competitiveness. The contribution of schools to

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<sup>11</sup> Clarfeldt, A. (2006) *Science Fiction*. Manchester, Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2006/jan/10/research.highereducation> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Callaghan, J. (2010) *A rational debate on the facts*. Available at: [www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html) (Accessed 16th April 2020).

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generate a skilled workforce was held to be paramount. There was around this time a public castigation of schools not using traditional methods. However, an interesting aside to this formative speech came in a conversation that I had with a colleague, Professor Kathryn Riley. Kathryn is Professor of Urban Leadership at University College London (Institute of Education). She described a conversation that she had with Callaghan shortly after he gave that speech. He was relatively unusual in that he was one of only a very small number of British prime ministers who had not been to university. He spoke to her of his considerable anxiety at the student unrest that had taken place in France, notably at the Sorbonne a few years previously. He was adamant that he did not want to see liberal approaches to education and *laissez-faire* teaching create similar situations in the UK.

Whatever the motivation, his comments were to translate into reform and a centralisation of education with the publication of the 1988 *Education Reform Act*. This certainly initiated new levels of accountability through such agencies as inspection, published school league tables, greater levels of parental representation in the governance of schools and of course the national curriculum. So, strangely, the disorder at The Sorbonne did change what was taught in Surbiton.

### FROM MINOR TO MAJOR

Following the 1988 Education Reform Act,<sup>13</sup> a National Curriculum became mandatory in schools. The Programmes of Study, such as the one for mathematics (1989),<sup>14</sup> were drafted and published, with teaching being aligned shortly afterwards.

I was a deputy headteacher in a secondary school at the time. There was a great emphasis on subjects such as mathematics, English, science, technology (with IT seen as a separate entity) and a modern foreign language. Following representation, religious education was also incorporated into the staple diet. Subjects such as history, geography, PE, drama and music were almost completely sidelined. The subtext was an emphasis on subjects that supported commercial global competitiveness, what in more contemporary parlance we refer to as STEM subjects.

At the time, one of the teaching unions circulated button badges with the slogan: ‘120% Curriculum’. This was very much the perception that, with implications of

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<sup>13</sup> The Education Reform Act (1988) United Kingdom (available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/section/1>) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020)

<sup>14</sup> The Education (National Curriculum) (Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study in Mathematics) Order 1989. United Kingdom (available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1989/308/contents/made>) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020)

the Programmes of Study for the core subjects, there was simply not enough time within the school day to accommodate the subjects being downgraded to a peripheral status.

On 14th July 1995, the then Prime Minister, John Major,<sup>15</sup> made a speech to leaders from teachers' unions, sports council representatives and politicians. At a stroke he repositioned sport in schools:

*What we propose in schools at the beginning is to ensure firstly that competitive team games get a much higher profile in the national curriculum than they had previously; that there will be a minimum of two hours formally, but another four hours a week informally, outside school hours with the help of teachers who will earn performance points on pay, with the help of teachers who will have special training and extra resources for that training; with amendments to the Teacher Training Colleges and the Teacher Training syllabuses to provide many more teachers who are willing and able to have a skill in teaching a mainstream winter game and a mainstream summer game to the youngsters in their schools. I know from talking to many of the teachers that they are enthusiastic about this, and we must provide them with the help and assistance to carry that enthusiasm into being.*

There is still some debate about the impact of Major's intervention. However, the advocacy of sport is widely seen as positive. Within schools and particularly within secondary schools its prescription was perceived at the best as challenging and at worst alarming. By 1995 schools had been creating fragile models of the curriculum as they tried to pack in competing demands from what were now seen as marginalised subjects such as art, geography, history and PE. Ingenious timetables were created using circuses and focus days. The requirement to now include mandated time for sport felt like somebody had opened an outside door as leaders were trying to build house of cards.

As a secondary head at the time, the feeling of panic intensified on discovering that my local education authority, without consultation, had just sold the school's games fields to the Tesco supermarket chain. The school's long-jump pit is forever buried under the pet-food aisle.

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<sup>15</sup> Major, J. (1995) *Speech in London on Sport – 14 July 1995* <http://www.johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1990-1997/mr-majors-speech-in-london-on-sport-14-july-1995> (accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2020)

## THE STRANGE LEGACY OF GRAEME ANDREW LOGAN

Graeme Andrew Logan is not a name that springs immediately to mind, until you realise that four months after his birth, he was adopted and renamed Michael Andrew Gove.<sup>16</sup> Educated in two Scottish primary schools and then gaining a scholarship to the independent Robert Gordon's College, he went to Oxford University, where he became a friend of Boris Johnson. He moved into politics after working as a print journalist. Gove first entered the House of Commons in 2005, having been elected as the Conservative Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath. Within five years, as the Conservatives formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, he became Secretary of State for Education.

His appointment was like watching a fireworks display caused by someone dropping a match into the box that they were being stored in. Recommendations and policies were evolving sometimes from due process and sometimes, it appeared, on the basis of personal whim. In 2011, a year after his appointment, he terminated the previous Labour government's Building Schools for the Future programme in six local authorities, which ended with a judicial review. Mr Justice Holman, sitting in London, allowed the challenges by the councils and declared that 'The Secretary of State for Education had unlawfully failed to consult them before imposing the cuts'. In five of the six council cases, the same judge added that the failure was 'so unfair as to amount to an abuse of power' (Richardson, 2011).<sup>17</sup>

There also seem to have some very personalised forays into curriculum content, with an announcement at the 2010 Conservative Party Conference that primary and secondary school curricula would be restructured to include Hardy, Keats, Byron, Austen and Dickens, and further that Professor Simon Schama would advise on creating a more overtly British history. Later Schama was to denounce Gove's intended history curriculum proposals as 'insulting and offensive' and 'pedantic and utopian', and he accused Gove of constructing a 'ridiculous shopping list' of subjects (Furness, 2013).<sup>18</sup> The list of interventions goes on,

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<sup>16</sup> Gove, M. (2011) *2011 Speech at the Conservative Party Conference*. London, SayIt. <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speaker/michael-gove> (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, H. (2011) *Councils defeat government over school buildings*. London, BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12429152> (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Furness, H. (2013) *Hay Festival 2013: Don't sign up for Gove's insulting curriculum*. London The Daily Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/10090287/Hay-Festival-2013-Dont-sign-up-to-Goves-insulting-curriculum-Schama-urges.html> (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2020)



stirring controversy and leading to three of the major teaching unions passing votes of no confidence in his policies in 2013.

Despite his four turbulent years in the lead government role for education, he did create a sea change in the English education system. When Gove took office in 2010, the Labour administration had overseen 1% of English schools, around 200, become academies. Michael Gove accelerated the move to academisation. By the time he left office in 2014, the number of academies had rocketed to almost six in ten secondary schools, and one in five primaries. This was driven by a draconian approach allied with supportive legislation, e.g. the Academies Act (2010).<sup>19</sup>

The unfolding story, which includes the formation of Multi-Academy Trusts, Free Schools and the development of regional structures organising these schools, is both extensive and complex. However, what was striking was that, whilst academies continue to be inspected Ofsted, they do not have to follow the National Curriculum. Certainly, they are required to teach a broad and balanced curriculum, including English, maths and science, and they must also teach religious education.

So, with amazingly little debate, Michael Gove disappled around half of English schools from compliance with the National Curriculum. This a mere 22 years after the Education Reform Act (1988).

## BRITANNIC RULES

It is quite disturbing to follow the vapour trail of the developments of some of the different and even entrenched aspects of our national curriculum. Surely, there should be an expectation that our children would be served by a curriculum which is coherent, relevant and certainly not happenstance. The schooling that we have often seems to be a product of political ideology, bad science and economic urgency.

All of this before we even question why subjects are retained in silos. Is the teaching of knowledge components in such discrete packages a demonstrable necessity or simply a carry forward from a historical higher education system? Perhaps the explanation might be even more esoteric and could really be the abiding influence of the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in three volumes in 1771.<sup>20</sup> This was one of a number of projects from that period which sought to systematise knowledge.

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<sup>19</sup> The Academies Act (2010) United Kingdom (available at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/32/contents/enacted> (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020))

<sup>20</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or A dictionary of arts and sciences, Compiled Upon a New Plan, in Which the Different Sciences and Arts Are Digested Into Distinct Treatises or Systems (1771) Edinburg, Encyclopaedia Britannica* <https://digital.nls.uk/encyclopaedia-britannica/archive/144133900> (accessed 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

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Most of this preliminary edition was written by the unfortunately named William Smellie. He styled it the *Encyclopaedia Britannica: or A Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences, Compiled Upon a New Plan, in Which the Different Sciences and Arts Are Digested Into Distinct Treatises or Systems* (sic) (1771: frontpiece). Subsequently, this epistemological straitjacket was hiked around millions of homes by acolyte salesmen. Perhaps Smellie is the ghost in the educational machine?