

## **Reassessing 1960s philosophy of the curriculum**

John White

Educational Foundations and Policy Studies

Institute of Education

University of London

### **I**

When I came into philosophy of education in the 1960s, a core idea was that education, or liberal education, is essentially to do with the pursuit of various kinds of propositional knowledge for non-instrumental reasons. Paul Hirst argued this in Hirst 1965b; Richard Peters in Peters 1966:ch 5; and both authors together in Hirst and Peters 1970. These arguments are well known and do not need elaborating here.

There have been many kinds of critique of these positions. The one that has always interested me (as in White 1973: chs 2,6; 1990: ch 7) and still does is: why go for this position in the first place? How, if at all, can it be justified?

Several sorts of justification were provided in those days, from the ‘transcendental’ arguments used by Peters (1966: 163-5) and Hirst (1965b, pp 125-6) to Downie, Loudfoot and Telfer’s (1974: 50) appeal to intuition. The suggestion in these arguments tended to be that there is something odd about even raising the question ‘Why pursue knowledge?’: for asking the question presupposes a commitment to this pursuit and/or it carries a false presumption that the claim requires further grounding. The challenges to the two positions are also well-known and here I will take their cogency as read (eg. White 1973: 11-13; 78-82). Their upshot has been to insist that the question cannot be just spirited away like this. There are many alternative candidates for central aims of education and it cannot be taken for granted that the pursuit of various types of theoretical understanding for non-instrumental reasons wins out over more practical pursuits, personal development, citizenship or promoting a strong economy.

Even the critics of the theory shared a wider commitment with its proponents.

Dearden 1968, White 1973, Barrow 1976 and Downie et al 1974 produced other justifications of curriculum activities. But Dearden, White, Barrow and Downie et al. took for granted something about the *content* of those curriculum activities: that disciplined forms of thought – eg. in science, mathematics, history, the arts,

philosophy – should be at or near their centre. Crudely, for there were variations in all these positions, they took over something like the curriculum content of Hirst and Peters and appeared to see their main philosophical task as seeking to furnish it with a more adequate rationale than those two authors were perceived to have done.

British sociologists of education of that period gave the philosophers of education a hard time - notably Michael Young (1971, ch1), who wrote that their position

appears to be based on an absolutist conception of a set of distinct forms of knowledge which correspond closely to the traditional areas of the academic curriculum and thus justify, rather than examine, what are no more than the socio-historical products of a particular time. (p23)

The response of the philosophers tended to be to brush this kind of criticism aside. They said it embraced, indefensibly, a relativistic view of knowledge. Also, there was nothing in their attachment to disciplines of thought that made them root for traditional school subjects: where were modern languages in the Hirstian scheme and its variants; where was physical education?

Yet Young's shaft was basically on target. Those on the inside of the (mainly) 'London line' saw the variations between the positions of Hirst, Peters, Dearden, White, Barrow and Downie et al. in terms of deep chasms between rival approaches. From a more distanced point of view, similarities were more perceptible than differences. If the insiders weren't arguing for a school curriculum of traditional subjects, they were certainly in favour of an *idealised form* of this, one which subjected most of its traditional content to philosophically defensible considerations about the nature of knowledge. I should gloss this last remark in the case of Paul Hirst, who has made it clear in all his writings that his theory was about a 'liberal education' and not about school subjects or the school curriculum as a whole, which might contain non-intellectual elements like physical education. This said, it is still true that on his view the disciplines of knowledge were to have a central place in curriculum design.

This preconception in favour of intellectual activities tended to obscure the fact that curriculum planning has to start farther back. It should not begin by taking a certain content as central – in this case, intellectual activities – but needs to begin with a review of more general educational aims and with decisions based on the most defensible of these. True, Dearden, White, Barrow and Downie et al.

discussed various aims, eg. personal autonomy, morality and happiness. Hirst, as we shall see below, made a connexion between the pursuit of knowledge and the good life. But none of them *began* with a comprehensive assessment of possible aims and then went into ways of realising the more defensible of them, without prejudice as to what the ways might be. They appeared to take it as read that intellectual pursuits were to be dominant.

## 2

From a 2005 perspective the philosophers of education of the 1960s seem to be unwitting apologists of a specific form of schooling. Michael Young was right to call it a socio-historical product of a particular time. The curriculum they favoured was an idealised form of the broad, subject-based, intellectually-orientated, curriculum which, over the previous half century had come to dominate élite education in the new (ie post-1904) state secondary grammar schools and in independent schools. The 1960s were a decade in which the divisions of the post-war tripartite system were under challenge and many, especially after the Labour election victory in 1964, wanted the academic education of the grammar school to be provided for all children, not for a minority. The curricular philosophies of

Peters, Hirst, Barrow, Dearden, Downie et al, White and others can be read as theoretical elaborations of this egalitarian idea, which became increasingly realised in practice in the new comprehensive schools of that era.

What is this broad, academic curriculum which these philosophers all then took as read and which, since the coming of the National Curriculum in 1988, has become staple for the whole nation? Its origins can be traced back at least to the early eighteenth century and indeed to the sixteenth.

There is now wide agreement (see Triche and McKnight 2004) that the sixteenth century protestant logician Ramus (Pierre de la Ramée) is a major figure in the history of this traditional curriculum. This comes out forcibly in David Hamilton's (1990) *Curriculum History*. Ramus' logic consisted of a branching scheme of dichotomies, expressed in print form as a series of conceptual maps, from the most general categories to the most specific, within which the heterogeneity of God's created world could be systematically ordered. Following Plato, Ramus held that this world was to be understood as a 'material counterpart of an ordered series of ideas existing in the mind of God' (quoted in Morgan, J. (1986:107).

Ramus was, in Hamilton's words (1990: 23), 'the high priest of method'. His logical maps were about both what to teach and how to teach it (p26). They enabled the content of learning to be systematically arranged in discrete branches of knowledge and sub-divided into smaller units within those; and they gave teachers clear routes through the material, moving from more abstract to less abstract, experience-related components and vice-versa. It is easy to understand the attractiveness of Ramist method to Puritan preachers, schoolmasters and textbook writers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, given the link that Puritans made between possessing knowledge of God's world and personal salvation and their consequent interest in transmitting to their audiences huge quantities of orthodox information rather than encouraging them to think for themselves. Ramist thinking was not only important in the development of Puritan education in England and Scotland. It was also central to New England Puritanism in America (Miller 1939: ch 5); and on the continent of Europe found its clearest educational expression in the work of Jan Comenius (Triche and McKnight 2004: 53).

By the eighteenth century, while most élite education in Britain was still confined to the classics, the puritan-rooted, dissenting communities in England and in Scotland were developing systems of schooling for older boys based on a broad

curriculum of discrete subjects taught in English – a curriculum in which more abstract subjects took precedence. These subjects typically included logic, ethics, theology, mathematics, branches of science (then known as ‘natural philosophy’), and sometimes aspects of history and geography.

The Dissenting Academies, founded in England for the theological training as well as, in some cases, the general education of sons of dissenters after the Clarendon Code of the early 1660s debarred them from much of public life, have often been credited with the introduction of the ‘modern’ curriculum (McLachlan 1931, Clarke 1940: 16, Williams 1961: 133-4); but it seems that their influence may have been more limited than once thought (Mercer 2001). We need to add to their work that of the Scottish ‘academies’ of the eighteenth century, rooted in the Presbyterian culture of that country, which also provided a broad-based initiation into the major forms of knowledge of the day (Strong 1909: 161-169)

The role of the Dissenting Academies in the scientific advances which helped to turn England into an industrial country is well known, the chemist Joseph Priestley, for instance, having been a tutor at Warrington Academy. How is it that these and other institutions set up by the most earnest of protestant Christians, the

descendants of the puritans, could have devoted so much of their energy to the sciences and to the mathematics behind them?

For the dissenters, including under this heading the Scottish Presbyterians, there was no conflict. The most important thing in their lives was personal salvation – of themselves and their families first and then of other members of their community. A condition of election was a sound and comprehensive understanding of God’s creation in all its heterogeneity. Hence the importance in the academies of the new ‘modern’ subjects which replaced the traditional classical curriculum of the grammar schools and universities. Although some of these were harnessable to non-salvationist goals, both personal and industrial, until well on into the eighteenth century they were not studied primarily for those reasons. The central focus was on the acquisition of various kinds of knowledge for its own sake, given its significance as a prerequisite of salvation.

Morgan’s (1944) study of the Puritan family in seventeenth century New England underlines the attachment to acquiring knowledge which powered English and Scottish puritans as well as New English Congregationalists. He writes

For a people who believed in predestination and the absolute sovereignty of God the Puritans ascribed an extraordinary power to education. (Morgan 1944: 51)

Parents had a duty to educate their children so that they, too, could become members of the 'elect' worthy of salvation. In particular, parents had to help their sons to choose their particular calling. (For girls there was no choice since their calling was to be a housewife). Some boys, who were intelligent enough and whose parents were rich enough, might put off the choice of a calling until later by going to Harvard College. 'Anyone with a 'liberal' education would adopt a 'liberal' calling, that is, a calling which required no manual labor and no long period of apprenticeship' (p.30). Parents wanted their children to 'do well' (p.49), and had only fulfilled their obligations after they saw 'their Children well dispos'd of, well settled in the World' (quoted on p.39), that is, well married and settled in their own home.

Children learned to read and to acquire knowledge for religious reasons. As Protestants, they had to be able to read the Bible themselves (pp45-6). Lack of knowledge was seen as man's chief enemy – a reaction to the perceived intention of the old Roman Catholic regime to keep people ignorant. For the Puritan the

acquisition of knowledge, especially of the scriptures, was a necessary route to salvation (p 46). They thought it should begin early and intensively. New England ministers believed that ‘Satan never hesitated to begin his assaults upon children in their infancy, “ and therefore if you would prevent him, do not you delay, but be dropping in instruction as they are able, and as soon as they are able to understand any thing”.’ (p53). ‘Children were taught as fast as they could learn’ (ibid.)

One reason for the preoccupation with early learning must have been the far greater probability than in our age of dying young. Given the comparative recentness of the assumption that most people in our society will live into old age, this thought must have exercised devout parents even into the twentieth century. Comenius (see above), who, like Morgan’s New England families, lived in the seventeenth century, put forward as the first of his six reasons for beginning education early

..the uncertainty of our present life. For that we must leave it is certain, but when and how is uncertain. And that any should be snatched away unprepared is a danger greatly to be dreaded, since a man is thus doomed eternally. For, just as a man must go through life without a limb if he leave his mother’s womb bereft of it, so, if, when we leave this world, our minds

have not been moulded to the knowledge of and participation in God, there will be no further opportunity given us. And therefore, as the matter is of such importance, the greatest haste is necessary, lest any man be lost.

(Comenius 1907: 57)

Morgan's account helps us to grasp the role that the acquisition of knowledge must have had for the abler sons of the more affluent English and Scottish dissenters of the eighteenth century, who went to the new academies and were the counterparts of those who received their 'liberal education' at Harvard College. Knowledge-acquisition was pursued with intensity, driven on by the work ethic to which the Puritans/dissenters adhered.

The central point for present purposes is that for most of the eighteenth century inducting academy students into the various disciplines of knowledge had a mainly religious purpose – to acquaint them with the manifold glory of God's world. The purpose of the curriculum was not primarily vocational or economic. This was a broad liberal education based largely on the pursuit of knowledge and orientated towards salvation.

There is more to be said about the origins of the dissenters' curriculum, but I want to look now at its posthumous influence. The new subject-based curriculum, the methodical pedagogy and rigid timetabling that went with it were favoured by the 'middling class' of persons, largely constituted by dissenters, who defined themselves against the landed establishment above and the poor below. Their religiosity, as Tawney (1926) and others have taught us, brought them not only the conviction of salvation, but also worldly success. Hard work in dedication to a vocation chosen in line with God-given talents – often in commerce, banking or manufacture - paid off in financial terms.

By the early nineteenth century, the English Dissenting Academies were in decline as institutions of general education. At the same time new schools (private, proprietary and reformed grammar) were being created for the wealthy dissenting middle classes, who were now merging at the top end with the old establishment. Their clients pressed for the same kind of broad curriculum as had been found in the academies, in opposition to the narrow classical education of the old grammar schools. Brian Simon (1960: 102-125) gives a good account of these developments.

The onward progress of the middle classes in wealth and now political influence continued through the nineteenth century, fuelled now by the evangelical revival, and facilitated by the repeal of the laws excluding dissenters from public life. Soon after mid-century, official action was taken to tidy up the raggedness of what schools across the nation were offering, and to fit the content of the curriculum explicitly to a three-fold social class division. In the late 1850s and 1860s, while the Clarendon Commission pressed for the retention of the classical curriculum in the leading public schools, and the Newcastle Commission urged a three-Rs based education for the masses, the Taunton Commission recommended the general modern curriculum for second and third grade endowed and private schools, that is, largely for middle and lower ranks of the middle classes. The modern curriculum of the Prussian Realschule influenced its thinking, as did the curricular desires of different sections of the English middle classes. It is significant that Prussia was a Protestant state (its Lutheran and Calvinist churches had been brought together in a unified Evangelical Church in 1817) and that its modern curriculum in the Realschule had been created in line with the wishes of the same commercial and industrial groups as were central to the English middle class - who had been pressing governments for many years but with little success to improve schooling for their children along modern lines.

The twentieth century entrenched the middle classes – now much more diverse in their composition, increasingly secular after mid-century, and less separable from other social groups - in the political influence which they were beginning to attain by its early years. (The 1906 election returned 185 Nonconformist MPs, nearly all sympathetic to the new Liberal government. (Binfield 1977: 207)). The old Puritan notion of belonging to an elect destined for salvation had by then lost most of its force, but vestiges of it may have remained in the notion of an academic élite identified by mechanisms of selection. There were three decisive events here, spread evenly across those hundred years. Each of them involved what came increasingly to be seen as the ‘traditional’ subject-based curriculum.

In 1904 a chasm was created between the new local authority secondary schools and elementary schools. The secondary schools, as under the Taunton proposals about the content of schooling (which were not put into effect), had to follow a broad subject-based curriculum, consisting in the 1904 case of

English language and literature, at least one language other than English, geography, history, mathematics, science, drawing, manual instruction (boys), domestic subjects (girls), physical exercise and organised games.

Elementary schools, catering for some seventy-five per cent of children, were obliged to follow a less intellectual curriculum, which included no science (only nature study), no foreign language, and more manual subjects. The architect of this division at the Board of Education was a lapsed evangelical with an ancient Puritan pedigree, Robert Morant (Allen 1934: 3-4). His educational changes reflected his more general political conviction ‘of the increasing need of voluntarily subjecting the impulses of the many ignorant to the guidance and control of the few wise’ (op.cit. p.125).

The second reinforcement of middle class power via education is found in the increasing use of intelligence tests to justify secondary selection, culminating in their post-Second-World-War use as part of the new 11+ examination. A key figure here was Cyril Burt, like Morant from puritan (Congregationalist) stock (White 2005, White forthcoming 2006). Burt was able to provide the system created by Morant with a rationale based on the IQ and deriving ultimately from his eugenicist interest in preserving an intellectual élite. He held that if middle-class children were over-represented in the new post-war grammar schools, this was because the higher average intelligence of parents tended to be transmitted to their children (Burt 1969: 20). The 1904 division between an academic curriculum

for selective schools and a non-academic one for the rest was prolonged into the post-1944 era until the (partial) erosions of the new comprehensive system.

The third reinforcement was the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988. As Richard Aldrich (1988: 22) has pointed out, the new statutory subjects were almost identical to those of 1904. Now they were for all children at state schools, not only a tiny élite. The subject-based curriculum was also extended from the secondary to primary schools. What began in the eighteenth century as a university/upper secondary level curriculum had percolated by 1988 into the infant school. (“Do not you delay, but be dropping in instruction as they are able, and as soon as they are able to understand any thing”). The imposition of the middle-class curriculum on the whole nation did no disfavour to the middle classes.

### 3

The 1960s philosophies of education came soon after the second of these developments, the 1944 changes. They can be read as providing philosophical justifications for an improved form of the by now firmly entrenched subject-based curriculum – not as a middle-class preserve but as an entitlement for all children. In the 1970s and 1980s they had a marked effect on official thinking about the

curriculum, not least among Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), and may for this reason have had some influence on the shape taken by the National Curriculum in 1988.

Peters and Hirst, in particular, both distanced their conception of education/liberal education from instrumental, eg vocational, aims. Students were to engage in intellectual study not in order to get a good job but, in Peters's case, for its own sake (Peters 1966: ch5); and in Hirst's, because of the connexion he made between the pursuit of propositional knowledge and the good life: a liberal education is 'the freeing of the mind to achieve its own good in knowledge' (Hirst 1965b: 43). This exclusion of utilitarian aims had a long pedigree, going back to the eighteenth century academies and beyond. 'To the Calvinists the earth and the rest of the cosmos was God's creation and therefore the study of it was in itself an act of reverence' (Mercer 2001: 42).

None of this is to deny more worldly motivations behind the modern subject-based curriculum, either in the late eighteenth century or in the 1960s. By 1780, science was beginning to be seen as important within the academies for reasons of social status. In England the richer dissenters were beginning to merge with the old establishment. 'To the socially élite, and those striving to achieve this status,

science was seen as part of enlightenment culture’ (ibid.). In the Taunton Report of 1868, ‘practical use in business’, ‘the value of culture in itself’, and ‘the advantage of sharing the education of the cultivated classes’ all figure as reasons why core middle-class parents wanted a modern curriculum (Maclure 1965: 94). In the 1960s, parents also saw a broad intellectual education – the fare of the new grammar school but not the secondary modern – partly as the passport to a new meritocratic élite.

From the late eighteenth century until 2000, therefore, we find a Janus-faced curriculum – one side looking to the non-utilitarian aims advocated by institutions, and the other to the often extrinsic goals of their clientele. Official reaffirmations of the traditional curriculum from Morant to Thatcher have presented it not as useful for this or that purpose, but as something whose value is unquestioned. This is especially clear in the 1988 National Curriculum with its almost total absence of aims.

This paper has argued that, from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the 1960s philosophies of the curriculum built around the demarcation of intellectual domains seem now to have been working within and unintentionally reinforcing the tradition of the ‘modern’ broad subject-based curriculum, which in

the early twentieth century had won out over the classical curriculum in the wider battle for political supremacy between the old establishment and the aspiring middle classes – a battle concluded by the merging of new and old élites in the interwar period (Rubinstein 1998). After mid-century many egalitarian educational thinkers, including most or even all of the philosophers of education so far mentioned, wanted the working classes to enjoy the same curricular advantages as those from the elite. In some cases – as in my own – this desire was intensified by personal experience of upward social mobility via the ‘ladder’ of scholarships into elite schooling.

If this thesis is correct, the 1960s theories can be viewed as belonging to a long tradition of curriculum thinking in Britain, traceable back through the history of middle class education to the religiously-rooted curricula of the puritan dissenters.

4

The thesis is only about a way of seeing, an interpretation. It is not about intentions on anyone’s part to provide a philosophical rationalisation for the recently victorious ‘modern’ curriculum over its rival, still less for the religious outlook which once lay behind it.

Given this disclaimer, there are religious considerations to do with the dissenting/puritan legacy which are worth airing when reviewing the work of the 1960s, although it is not clear how much weight should be placed on them. A good place to start is with Philip Phenix, whose work, although that of an American philosopher of the curriculum, became part of the standard syllabus on the topic in British higher education in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Phenix's well-known book *Realms of Meaning* (1964) discussed the ideal curriculum broadly as Paul Hirst did – that is, in terms of a small number of logically distinct categories of understanding, not always by any means coincident with school subjects – although Hirst erected his own categories on a different basis and independently of Phenix (Hirst 1974: ch4).

Phenix had a background in theology and university teaching in religion. His religious views influenced his work in philosophy of education after his appointment to Teachers College in 1954. In *Education and the Common Good* (1961) he wrote that 'the central task of education is religious conversion' (p242) and that 'the sovereign test of all education is whether or not it is religious – that is, whether or not it tends towards conversion of the person to unconditional

commitment to truth and right' (p243). The last quotation bears out Phenix's statement that he is understanding 'religious conversion' in a non-conventional sense (p242). 'The word "religious" is intended to signify the attitude and practice of sincere devotion to what is supremely worthwhile... We are reserving the name of *religion* in the present analysis for a reverential attitude to what is of ultimate value' (p237). 'This is the one supreme purpose which unites all the lesser purposes of education: to engender reverence' (p252).

Phenix's attachment to reverence puts us in mind of the old academies of the dissenters, the close connexion they made between the teaching of science and other subjects and awe at God's created universe. His theological education was at Union Theological Seminary in New York - the institution where the Congregationalist G. Stanley Hall had studied in the 1860s. He thus belonged to the same thought-world as that of the British dissenters.

Three years after *Education and the Common Good*, Phenix published his most well-known book *Realms of Meaning* (1964). It was here that he spelt out his abstract schema for the curriculum, based on the following six 'realms': symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics and synoptics. The close connexion between religion and the whole of education made in his earlier book is now absent, religion

being confined to one of three strands belonging to ‘synoptics’, along with history and philosophy. We are told that ‘the goal of the religious life is *salvation*’ (p250). It looks as if the term ‘religion’ is being used here more in its conventional sense than in the 1961 book. At the same time, the overarching view that education has to do with exploring the different ways in which human life is connected to a larger whole of ultimate value connects the two works. The first words of *Realms of Meaning* are

It is not easy to sustain a sense of the whole. Many a person pursues his own limited calling with scarcely a thought for his place in the total drama of civilised endeavour (p3)

And a little later he writes

Students and teachers alike are prone to take the curriculum as they find it, as a traditional sequence of separate elements, without ever inquiring into the comprehensive pattern within which the parts are located (ibid).

This last quotation is revealing in its assumption that the traditional curriculum *does have an overall meaning*, but that it has come to be taken as a collection of

disparate items. How far can Phenix be seen as reviving something of the old vision which guided the puritan/dissenting curriculum but which had by the 1960s been largely eroded?

Phenix's emphasis on reverence, mentioned earlier, reminds us of the link Peters made a few years later between education and intrinsically worthwhile activities. His transcendental argument for these is indeed couched partly in religious terms. In rejecting games in favour of theoretical activities as candidates for worthwhileness, he notes that they are 'hived off from man's curiosity about the world and his awe and concern about his own peculiar predicament within it', filling this out by a quotation from Whitehead about the nature of religion and its connexion with the value of a human life in merging 'its individual claim with that of the objective universe' (Peters 1966: 164). As Ray Elliott (1986: 57) has written, Peters's 'response to Being-in-totality and to human being-in-the-world, on the contemplation of them, is one of piety... he attaches what is, according to his own account, a religious significance to that which gives and discovers meaning and which receives and discloses it'.

When he wrote the passage mentioned above, Peters had been a convert to Quakerism for some thirty years. How far does the transcendental argument

contain echoes of the old belief, especially strong in Dissent, that, given the divine nature of the human soul, understanding oneself as situated in a world of which one stands in awe, is the route to understanding God and thereby the meaningfulness of our human life?

5

Unlike Phenix's and Peters's work, Paul Hirst's (1965b) account of a liberal education based on logically distinct forms of knowledge has no vestige of a religious rationale - not even anything so brief as Peters's hint in that direction in his transcendental argument. On Hirst's view, religious knowledge (on the possibility of whose existence he cast serious doubt) may *at most* feature as one form of knowledge along with mathematics and other disciplines, but has no wider place in the curriculum. More generally, he makes it plain that while the autonomously acquired knowledge which underpins a Christian education is within a religious framework, in a secular education such as he favours this framework is not present:

It is true that the Christian sees education in a particular setting that is expressed in his religious beliefs. This setting, of course, the non-Christian

does not share, but it makes no difference to the actual determination of the content and methods of education in general. Like scientific theory, educational theory is in general autonomous, and thus must be formed and justified independently of any religious beliefs a man may have. But of course in both of these the Christian regards the understanding he achieves as knowledge of God's universe, which in His goodness He wishes men to achieve. The Christian thus sees autonomously acquired knowledge in a wide comprehensive understanding of experience that is religious. But this context adds nothing to scientific knowledge, and I see no reason to assume that it significantly affects educational principles in general. Religious beliefs give an added significance to what ought to be done, but they do not in any way alter its validity, for this is rationally determined. (Hirst 1965a: 53)

Hirst's emphasis on rationally determined knowledge, on freeing individuals' minds so that they can come to an objective appreciation of how things are in different domains, may be interpreted as a reaction against the evangelical Christianity in which he had been brought up.

It is interesting to compare Paul Hirst in this respect with John Dewey, who also rejected his religious, in his case Congregationalist, upbringing in favour of more secular perspectives. Dewey reacted against the clear-cut dualisms (cf Ramist dichotomies) and subject-centredness of the curriculum thinking of his time, and pressed for schooling to be firmly rooted in practical activities. This comes out in *My Pedagogic Creed*:

I believe, therefore, that the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities.

(Dewey 1897 Article III)

Although Dewey nowhere, to my knowledge, mentions the New England puritan tradition which lay behind the broad subject-based, curriculum which he was criticising, his rejection of this type of schooling is in line with his wider rejection of his native religion.

Similar statements, apparently obliquely critical of the tradition, especially its penchant towards abstract classifications, are found in *Democracy and Education*, which refers to:

..the feeling that knowledge is high and worthy in the degree in which it deals with ideal symbols instead of the concrete; the scorn of particulars except as they are deductively brought under a universal; the disregard for the body; the depreciation of arts and crafts as intellectual instrumentalities.  
(Dewey 1916: 310)

and also states:

Under present conditions the scholastic method, for most persons, means a form of knowing which ... includes making distinctions, definitions, divisions and classifications for the mere sake of making them – with no objective in experience...The doctrine of formal discipline in education is the natural counterpart of the scholastic method. (p.399)

Hirst, in contrast to Dewey, did not in 1965 reject a curriculum based on propositional knowledge in favour of a curriculum of a more practical sort,

revolving around social engagement; although this is very much the sort of theory he came later to adopt when he shifted the basis of the curriculum from forms of knowledge to ‘social practices’ (Hirst 1993b). What he did, in effect, in 1965 was to put a broad propositional-knowledge-orientated curriculum on what he saw as a secure logical foundation, and without any religious framework surrounding it. His views were not finally detached from a way of thinking which made propositional knowledge central until the 1990s, when, like Dewey, he made the practical reasoning found in social practices the centrepiece of his thinking.

## 6.

To sum up. The agenda for mainstream philosophy of the curriculum in the 1960s and early 1970s was set by the Hirst-Peters approach with its emphasis on the pursuit of various kinds of propositional knowledge for non-instrumental reasons. In effect, if not in intention, their and the other theories mentioned helped to give the traditional subject-based curriculum (in an idealised form) a credibility which for those coming from other directions was hard to see. There is much room for thinking that the kind of curriculum all these philosophers favoured has its roots in what between 1860 and 1900 had come to be seen as a middle-class, ‘modern’ curriculum, and more deeply in the education of dissenting communities in the

previous two centuries. (For a recent account of how aspects of contemporary curriculum thinking in the USA have their roots in the Puritanism of early New England and also in Ramist thinking, see McKnight 2003). There are also religious aspects, connected with dissenting outlooks, of the 1960s work, but it is not clear whether this fact is merely a curiosity of little consequence or whether it is more significant.

4

There is no good reason for basing curriculum planning centrally around school subjects or forms of knowledge. One must start further back, with a broad exploration of overall aims. From these and other considerations, logical, practical and empirical, one can derive sub-aims of increasing specificity. Many of these aims will centre around or require different kinds of knowledge, *among other things*. At some point along the chain towards specificity, school subjects, or parts of them, may well have *some* role as vehicles of realising more general aims – but then other vehicles may well also have a role. (On all these points, see White 1982, 1990; Hirst 1993a; O’Hear and White 1991).

All this has immediate practical relevance. The subject-based English National Curriculum is even harder to justify now that, since 2000, there has been a reasonable set of overall aims to drive it. The mismatch between the new aims and the regulations for most of the traditional subjects is now very plain to see (White 2003). Calls for aims-based rather than subject-based curricula are at last gathering force, not least within the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), whose 2005 *Futures* project [[www.qca.org.uk/futures](http://www.qca.org.uk/futures)] is encouraging those responsible for different school subjects to reflect on the contribution their subject could make towards realising the overall aims.

## **Bibliography**

- Aldrich, R. (1988) 'The National Curriculum: an historical perspective' in  
Lawton, D. and Chitty, C. (eds) *The National Curriculum*  
London: Institute of Education University of London
- Allen, B.M. (1934) *Sir Robert Morant* London: Macmillan

Barrow, R. (1976) *Common Sense and the Curriculum* London: Allen and Unwin

Binfield, C. (1977) *So Down to Prayers: Studies in English Nonconformity 1780-1920* London: Dent

Burt, C.L. (1969) 'The mental differences between children' in Cox C.B. and Dyson, A.E. (eds) (1969) *Black Paper Two* London: The Critical Quarterly Society

Clarke, F. (1940) *Education and Social Change: an English interpretation* London: the Sheldon Press

Comenius, J. A. (1907) *The Great Didactic*, trans. Keatinge, M.W. London: Adam and Charles Black

Dearden, R.F. (1968) *The Philosophy of Primary Education* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Dewey, J. (1897) 'My pedagogic creed' *The School Journal* Vol 54.3

Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education* New York: Macmillan

Downie, R., Loudfoot, E. and Telfer, E. (1974) *Education and Personal Relationships* London: Methuen

Elliott, R.K. (1986) 'Richard Peters: a philosopher in the older style' in Cooper, D.E. (ed) *Education, values and mind* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Hans, N. (1951) *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Hirst, P.H. (1965a) 'Christian and Secular Education' *Hibbert Journal* Vol 63

Hirst, P.H. (1965b) 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge', included in Hirst (1974)

Hirst, P.H. (1974) *Knowledge and the Curriculum* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Hirst, P.H. (1993a) in O'Hear P. and White J. (eds) (1993) *Assessing the National Curriculum* London: Paul Chapman

Hirst, P.H. (1993b) 'Education, Knowledge and Practices' in Barrow, R. and White, P. (eds) *Beyond Liberal Education: Essays in Honour of Paul Hirst* London: Routledge

Hirst, P.H. and Peters R.S (1970) *The Logic of Education* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Maclure, S. (1965) *Educational Documents: England and Wales, 1816 to the present day* London: Methuen

McKnight, D. (2003) *Schooling, the Puritan Imperative and the Molding of an American National Identity* Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum

McLachlan, H. (1931) *English Education under the Test Acts* Manchester: Manchester University Press

Mercer, M. (2001) 'Dissenting academies and the education of the laity, 1750-1850' *History of Education* Vol 30 No 1

Miller, P. (1939) *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century* New York: Macmillan

Morgan, E.S. (1944) *The Puritan Family* Boston: Trustees of the Public Library

O'Hear, P. and White, J. (eds) (1991) *A National Curriculum for All* London: Institute for Public Policy Research

Peters, R.S. (1966) *Ethics and Education* London: Allen and Unwin

Phenix, P.H. (1961) *Education and the Common Good* New York: Harper

Phenix, P.H. (1964) *Realms of Meaning* New York: McGraw-Hill

Rubinstein, W.D. (1998) 'Britain's élites in the interwar period, 1918-1939'

in Kidd, A. and Nicholls, D. *The Making of the British Middle Class?*

Stroud: Sutton

Simon, B. (1960) *Studies in the History of Education 1780-1870* London:

Lawrence and Wishart

Strong, J. (1909) *A history of secondary education in Scotland* Oxford:

Clarendon Press

Tawney, R.H. (1926) *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* West Drayton:

Penguin

Triche, S. and McKnight, D. (2004) 'The quest for method: the legacy of

Peter Ramus' *History of Education* Vol 33 No 1 (pp39-54)

White, J. (1973) *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* London: Routledge

and Kegan Paul

White, J. (1982) *The Aims of Education Restated* London: Routledge and

Kegan Paul

White, J. (1990) *Education and the Good Life* London: Kogan Page

White, J. (2005) 'Puritan Intelligence' *Oxford Review of Education* Vol31  
No 3

White, J. (forthcoming 2006) *Intelligence, Destiny and Education: The  
ideological roots of intelligence testing* London: Routledge

White, J. (ed.) (2003) *Rethinking the School Curriculum* London:  
RoutledgeFalmer

Williams, R. (1961) *The Long Revolution* London: Chatto and Windus

Young, M.F.D. (ed) (1971) *Knowledge and Control* London: Collier-  
Macmillan