The puritan origins of the 1988 school curriculum in England

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The Dissenting Academies and the roots of the traditional academic curriculum

In 1988 all state schools in England were obliged to follow a statutory curriculum based on traditional school subjects. As Richard Aldrich (1988: 22) has pointed out, these subjects were almost identical to those prescribed by Robert Morant in the 1904 Regulations for new state secondary schools. In this chapter, I examine the origins of this academic subject-based curriculum which has proved so resilient over the past century.

One theory is that these origins are to be found in the Dissenting Academies of the eighteenth century set up for teaching the sons of members of dissenting sects. How far is this claim reliable?

In *The Long Revolution* Raymond Williams (1961: 133-4) writes of the Dissenting Academies

> These varied considerably in quality, but it can fairly be claimed that in the best of them, in the eighteenth century, a new definition of the content of a general education was worked out and put into practice. Here, for the first time, the curriculum begins to take its modern shape, with the addition of mathematics, geography, modern languages, and crucially the physical sciences.

We know from the history of the Academies that, as well as preparing students for the ministry, they also provided a general higher education – in

our terms an upper secondary/university education - for sons of dissenters from Puritan communities prevented by law after 1662 from attending universities. Boys usually began to attend the academies at 15, 16 or 17, staying for four or five years (McLachlan 1931: 26). As many of the English dissenters grew richer through commerce and industry throughout the eighteenth century, more and more of them must have had the wealth needed to prolong their sons' general education in this way, enabling them later to choose some 'liberal', non-manual, calling on the basis of a wider knowledge of God's world and of their own capabilities.

The early Academies, which had to rely on teachers from Oxford and Cambridge, followed the traditional classical curriculum of those universities. With the founding of Philip Doddridge's academy at Northampton in 1729 English finally replaced Latin as the medium of instruction. Without this, the new subjects which began to appear on the curriculum would have been far more difficult to teach. At Northampton the full list of subjects of study for the four year course was as follows:

First Year: logic, rhetoric, geography, metaphysics, geometry, algebra

Second Year: trigonometry, conic sections, celestial mechanics, natural and experimental philosophy, divinity, orations

Third Year: natural and civil history, anatomy, Jewish antiquities, divinity, orations

Fourth Year: civil law, mythology and hieroglyphics, English history, history of nonconformity, divinity, preaching and pastoral care

In addition, French was an optional subject and Hebrew, Greek and Latin, besides being used in prayers, were also taught in evening tutorials. In the first two years there were also required disputations in Latin and English (McLachlan 1931:147). A similar pattern of subjects, with some variations, spread from Northampton to other academies as the eighteenth century progressed.

A word about English. Its only mention in the 1729 account is in connexion with required disputations in the first two years. In addition, divinity courses at the Academies standardly included practice in sermon writing; and according to McLachlan (p.28), this marked the origin of the English

composition which has since become a staple of English lessons. In some later academies English began to become a subject in itself, as at the end of the eighteenth century did 'Belles Lettres', in which literary works were studied, largely for the truths they contained (ibid.).

Art, with the aesthetic connotations the term has for us today, had little or no place in the academies, their emphasis being on knowledge. The early puritan belief in the need to acquire it as a requisite of salvation had persisted into the age of the academies. There was no tension in puritan thinking between acquiring knowledge on the one hand and faith on the other: philosophy, science, mathematics, history, geography and other subjects were held to be vehicles of the latter as they revealed the varied features of God's created world. Imagination and emotion, however, the sources of so much art, were thought of – in Watts's *Logic*, for instance – as tempters into error, as a 'fruitful source of false judgments' (Watts 1792: 181). The pursuit of truth was the all-encompassing aim.

Others besides Raymond Williams have noticed, or thought they have noticed, the revolutionary importance of the academies for the content of education. Some years before Williams the educationalist Fred Clarke, for instance, wrote:

> The Dissenting Academies are thus of importance in English educational history as representing a vigorous and sustained effort to think out a "modern" curriculum and apply it in practice. While not departing from the dominant idea of education for culture, and while remaining thoroughly English in temper, they cut loose from the prevailing tradition of classical training and aristocratic accomplishments, looked at their own actual world with open eyes, and worked out a curriculum which would prepare for effective living in such a world. In it, as it developed, classics and the customary linguistic studies had no great place; instead, we find English, history and modern languages with a good deal of mathematics and science (Clarke 1940: 16).

Although Clarke's last sentence, like Williams' own account, may exaggerate the extent of the change – modern languages, for instance, being optional and so more peripheral than he implies – his reference to 'the dominant idea of education for culture' touches something really important. The dissenters' curriculum was not intended to provide specialist training.

Here and there it included ‘commerce’ (McLachlan 1931: 331), but overwhelmingly its interest was in pure rather than applied knowledge. Theoretical rationality rather than practical was the substance. We know that alumni of the academies went on to apply what they had learnt to build the new industrial and commercial England of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. And it is true that if such items as mechanics and trigonometry and chemistry and hydrostatics had not been part of their programme they could never have used them to create the new world. But the main purpose of teaching them was not to help on the process of industrialisation, but to reveal the world as it truly is. At a higher-order level, this still had a practical purpose behind it in the shape of a religious, salvationist, aim. For puritan communities the acquisition of knowledge was a necessary route to salvation. The new curriculum was intended to acquaint students with the manifold glories of God’s created world. It had something of the same religious aim as Fred Clarke himself believed in, when he wrote in an earlier work that ‘the ultimate reason for teaching Long Division to little Johnny is that he is an immortal soul’ (Clarke 1923: 2).

How accurate is the picture of the Dissenting Academies as catalysts of curricular revolution that we find in Clarke and Williams, as well as in full-length academic works on the Academies published by Parker (1914) and McLachlan (1931) earlier last century? There are things to be said on the other side. Hans (1951) provides a more global account of ‘new trends in education in the eighteenth century’, and, while not denying the contribution that the Academies made, locates them as just one of several types of institution responsible for curricular modernisation. These included Oxford and Cambridge, grammar schools and private academies. Mercer (2001) also claims that Parker and McLachlan exaggerated the role played by the Academies in providing a progressive education for lay students. Although this was true of a handful of liberal academies like Warrington, Manchester College and Hackney New College, ‘after 1750 the vast majority of academies were small orthodox seminaries for the training of Nonconformist ministers’ (p35).

These doubts would appear to count against the bold thesis that the Dissenting Academies originated the modern subject-based curriculum that we find in English schools today. At the very least, this may require considerable qualification. A more circumspect claim would be the broader one, that Puritan/ Dissenting educational ideas and practices had a major, if not the only, role in the story.

This latter thesis broadens horizons beyond the Academies and enables us to take into account other dissenting institutions and ways of thinking. These include, in England, schools set up for dissenters from the end of the eighteenth century, and in eighteenth century Presbyterian Scotland both grammar schools and universities. The more accommodating thesis also allows us to go back to the world of Puritan education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before the first Academies appeared towards the end of the latter.

Ramus and the Puritan curriculum

The sixteenth century logician Pierre de la Ramée (Petrus Ramus) has been seen as a major figure in the history of the curriculum. This comes out forcibly in David Hamilton's (1990) book *Curriculum History*. Ramus's logic consisted of a branching scheme of dichotomies, from the most general categories to the most specific, within which the heterogeneity of God's created world could be systematically arranged. 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)). (See Fig 1.)

[Fig 1. Insert file labelled 'Ramus Map 1' with diagram headed P.RAMI DIALECTICA. Please also add reference: (Miller 1939: 126)]]

Hamilton relates Ramus to a wider group of humanist educationalists who preceded him and who were preoccupied with how teaching could best be organised. He quotes from Grafton and Jardine (1986: 124):

> 'Method' was the catchword of promoters of humanist education from the 1510s onwards. This practical emphasis on procedure signals a shift in intellectual focus on the part of pedagogical reformers, from the ideal end-product of a classical education (the perfect orator…) to classroom aids (textbooks, manuals and teaching drills).

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. As Peter Mack (1998: Vol 8: pp52-3) says, ' Ramus's method obliged him to avoid overlaps between subjects….He emphasised the need to select material, according to what we would now call disciplinary boundaries'. The logic maps also gave teachers clear routes through the material, moving especially from more abstract to less abstract, experience-related components, but also vice-versa.

It is easy to understand the attractiveness of Ramist method to Puritan or allied sect preachers, schoolmasters and textbook writers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – Comenius (1592-1670), for instance (Triche and McKnight (2004: 53)) - given their interest in transmitting to their audiences huge quantities of orthodox information rather than encouraging them to think for themselves. (See Comenius (1907) on the possibility of mass education once one finds the one right method for teaching any subject matter (XIII:15; XIX: 14-54); on teaching from the abstract and general towards the concrete and detailed (XVI: 38-45; XX: 19); on items learnt forming an encyclopaedic whole (XVIII: 34-5; XIX: 6)). In addition – and it is hard to know how much weight to put on the point – Ramist maps contain, according to Hamilton, the first recorded use of the word 'curriculum' in an academic context. (see Fig 2).

[Fig 2. Insert File labelled 'Ramist Map 2' headed TABVLA ARTIVM, QVAS IN. Delete the words 'Figure 3 A Ramist Map' at top left, and page no below. Please also add reference: Hamilton 1990: 27]

Hamilton suggests that it might be linked with the Calvinist predilection for the use of the term in the phrase '*vitae curriculum'*, allied with the common presentation of human life as an obstacle course on the way to salvation (pp26-8). Certainly, Ramist learning was far from detached from everyday preoccupations. It provided spiritual security.

> Uncertainty was the bane of Puritan existence, as in the well-reported psychological anxiety produced by nagging doubt of whether one was to undergo conversion or not. Ramist method provided not only

> psychological comfort but a "form" by which to place over, understand, and so control the world. (McKnight 2003: 54-5)

The fact that Puritans used Ramist logic not to promote free thought but to show the one true path that understanding must take (see Morgan, J (1986: 111) is a counterweight to an interpretation of Puritan educational activity in the seventeenth century aligning it with cutting-edge educational reform in the sciences and in the humanities, associated with the ideas of Bacon (Parker 1914: ch 1, Greaves (1969)). If one concentrates, as Morgan does, on the *intentions* of Puritan educationalists, these were far from embracing the new Enlightenment world that was beginning to emerge. They sought 'not man's intellectual dominion in a rational universe, but rather a subordination of human reason to the demands of an enthusiastic faith' (p309). But *consequences* are a different story. As we have seen, Ramus' logic was anchored at its non-abstract end in experience of the world. This gave it a point of contact with the Baconians. As Morgan (1986: 111) writes,

> Ramus' insistence that logic should agree with nature may have meant that puritan educators conditioned an era of students to see 'truth' in an empirically approached natural world, even though the puritans themselves had no such intention of diverting scholarly attention, or of shifting the bedrock of 'reality', from the Word to the world.

All this provides background to the fact that by the late eighteenth century at least some of the Dissenting Academies were the site of advanced scientific teaching and crucibles of industrial progress.

Ramus's logic, with the priority it gives to more abstract subjects and to teaching from the abstract to the concrete, and with its insistence on sharp, non-overlapping divisions between branches of knowledge, had an influence on the early formation of the 'modern' upper secondary school/higher education curriculum – in which logic, often Ramist logic, was indeed one of the components. It also has more than faint echoes in the traditional school subject-based curriculum we know today. More on both these points appears below.

Doubts about the role of the Dissenting Academies

Turning more globally from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, we have seen reason to doubt the strong thesis that the modern curriculum was born in the Academies. Between 1750 and 1850 the Academies had little hand in the education of the laity, being predominantly, as Mercer tells us, theological colleges for the preparation of ministers; and other institutions from grammar schools to private academies were teaching a wide range of modern subjects.

But these two types of evidence are not conclusive. Mercer's thesis is only about what happened after 1750. He also states (2001:35) that 'at the beginning of the eighteenth century at least half the academies were open to students who intended following careers other than in the ministry'. There is a plausible reason, which he does not mention, why the proportion of academies with lay students diminished after 1750 – from a half to about an eighth (pp35-6). As from 1779 Dissenters were allowed by law to follow the teaching profession (although dissenting schools also existed outside the law before this time, Hans (1951: 58-62) describing several examples of these). Many Dissenters moved from the Academies, as pupils and as tutors, into other institutions. One example of this is Mill Hill School (see also Roach 1986: 176-7 for details of its 'full and varied curriculum for the time'). This line of thinking strengthens the case for the influence of the Academies on the modern curriculum, either directly, via their own teaching, or via their staff teaching elsewhere.

There is more to be said, too, about Hans's thesis about the widespread presence of modern subjects in other eighteenth century institutions. Although Hans (1951: 38-41) shows that these subjects were taught in two or three of the leading grammar schools, he does nothing to suggest that, by and large, grammar school education was not centred virtually exclusively on the classics. His evidence for modern subjects in private schools and academies is much more extensive, but he admits that 'very few of them published a detailed curriculum of studies' (p63). Students were organised into groups according to their intended destinations (eg the universities, the navy, the army, business and law, some technical professions) and their curricula varied accordingly. But all students 'would study English, Arithmetic, Geography, Geometry, History; most of the pupils would take French and Drawing, and all would participate in Sports' (pp 64-5).

The curricular philosophy of these institutions was very different from that experienced by lay students in the Dissenting Academies. In most of the latter, lay students generally followed the first half of a four or five-year divinity course (Mercer 2001: 38). In the post-1729 Northampton course outlined above logic, mathematics, natural philosophy and divinity were prominent in the first two years of a four-year course. At Warrington Academy in 1780 the first three years of a five-year course covered theology, ethics, logic, mathematics, theoretical and experimental natural philosophy, geography, history, commerce, theory of language, elocution and composition (Mercer 2001: 39-40). In the Dissenting Academies, virtually the whole of the curriculum was common to all students in the first two or three years. *It was planned – for the most part - as a unified whole*: religious considerations were uppermost in framing it. It was meant to equip the believer, lay as well as clerical, with those forms of knowledge which would help him to understand the nature of God and of his world – to see both the big picture and also how the mass of details fitted into it. There is little evidence, according to Mercer (p40), to support the belief that the leading Dissenting businessmen and manufacturers who sent their sons to the Academies after 1750 were primarily guided by utilitarian motives.

In one important way, the English secondary school curriculum introduced in 1904 and reinforced in 1988 is closer to that of the dissenting than that of the private academy. It *is a unity, not fragmented according to intended destinations*. It is wholly common for all students, not common only in subjects seen as basic. Its elements are to be studied largely for non-instrumental reasons.

This is one reason why Hans's thesis does not undermine, as much as it perhaps appeared to, the claim that the Dissenting Academies had a major role in originating the modern subject-based curriculum. Another is this. In his conclusion, Hans (1951:210) states that in the middle of the nineteenth century 'all the achievements and pioneering ideas of the eighteenth century were forgotten'. Why this should be so he saw as a 'problem worthy of deeper investigation'. His own provisional thought on this is that the industrial revolution in the latter part of the eighteenth century produced a gulf between employers and labourers which was reflected in diverging forms of education for each, the new industrial middle class blocking the way for newcomers from below (211). This eroded the eighteenth century pattern, in which young people of lower social origin were more likely to

enter the institutions Hans describes. Science, which had become prominent in eighteenth century curricula, was henceforth demoted, as 'the social cleavage between employers of labour and employed labourers was reflected in the differentiation of social prestige, between the 'classical' and 'scientific' curriculum.' (212)

Hans's thesis is that although the great variety of schools and institutions with which he deals successfully introduced new subjects and new methods and so 'started modern education in England' (209), the history of their influence is not continuous, there having been a major breach in this story caused by the industrial revolution. He does not say how the breach was healed. Neither is his claim that the 'scientific' curriculum became associated with employed labourers rather than employers plausible, science having been kept out of working class curricula throughout the nineteenth century, as well as in the Morant reforms of 1904 which set a pattern which lasted well into the second half of the twentieth century.

The Puritan curriculum in Scotland

The Dissenting Academies were not the only eighteenth century institutions in which Puritan origins foreshadowed a modern curriculum. Scottish schools and universities also played a significant part, not only in the Scottish, but also in the English story. Again, we are talking about upper secondary/higher education.

Presbyterian Scotland had its own educational system for its élite. As early as 1574-80, the Principal of Glasgow University, Andrew Melville, established a curriculum which became the basis of the university's work for two centuries. As Smith (1955: 68) notes, his system was similar to that in many of the Dissenting Academies:

Year 1: Humanities (Greek and Latin) and Ramus' dialectic
Year 2: Mathematics, Cosmography, Asronomy
Year 3: Moral and Political Science
Year 4: Natural Philosophy and History

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, despite variations, its four universities, all dating from the fifteen and sixteenth centuries, tended towards a common pattern. This was to award MA degrees after a four year course in theology, medicine or the arts. The latter was the staple curriculum; and its bent towards philosophy is again reminiscent of the Dissenting Academies, Greek tending to be taught in the first year; logic and metaphysics in the second; ethics and pneumatics ('covering such abstruse questions as the nature of angels, the human soul, and the one true God') in the third; and natural philosophy probably including some mathematics in the fourth (Knox 1953: 16-17).

A tilt was given to this curriculum in a more practical direction when, following Perth's example in 1761, a number of Scottish towns set up Academies offering a two year higher secondary/university level course. In Perth's case

> The scheme of study included in the first year Natural Science, Mathematics, Navigation, Astronomy, and English; in the second, Natural Philosophy, Practical Geometry, Civil History, Logic and the Principles of Religion. All teaching and exercises were to be in English. In course of time, Fine Writing, Drawing, Painting, and Chemistry were included in the curriculum.
>
> (Strong 1909: 161)

Later in the century a further attempt was made to bring more order into the 'chaotic medley' of Scottish schools, which were rapidly increasing. Confusingly, the new type of school – which covered a wider age-group than the Academies, including the whole secondary age-group - was also called an 'academy'. One of the first, founded in 1793 for upper class boys, was Inverness Academy. It taught 'English grammatically' in the first year; Latin and Greek in the second; Writing, Arithmetic, and Bookkeeping in the third; Mathematics, Geography, Navigation, Drawing and Fortification in the fourth; and Civil and Natural History, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and Astronomy in the fifth (pp. 164-5). In the first half of the nineteenth century the curricula of these academies, which were erected all over the country, was copied by some of the grammar schools, although the classical tradition remained strong in others (pp168-9).

In the eighteenth century Scottish educational institutions had close links with the English dissenting communities. From the end of the seventeenth century, many dissenter students, who were barred from Oxford and Cambridge, went for their higher education to Glasgow and Edinburgh universities. Several of these became tutors in the Dissenting Academies, and occasionally some Scottish graduates, not trained in the Academies, also became tutors there. (McLachlan 1931:29-30). The replacement of Latin by English as medium of instruction in the Academies probably owed something to Scottish influence (Smith 1955: 70).

The story through to 1988

By the eighteenth century the dissenting communities in England had become a prominent part of the 'middling sort' of people, cut off as they were from the life and livelihoods of the Anglican establishment, and demarcated from the poor below (Gunn and Bell 2002: 17). Their religiosity, as Weber (1930), 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 paid off in financial terms. The dissenters' success in commerce, banking and manufacture, spurred by a desire for social improvement as they interpreted this, played a major part in the industrialisation of the country in the late eighteenth century, some of them rising to great wealth. By the early nineteenth century, the dissenting middle classes, swelled now by many Methodists and evangelical Anglicans, were beginning to grow in political power and influence, and were merging, at their top end, with the old landed class of aristocrats and gentry.

In education, the emphasis on a broad range of discrete disciplines which we found in the Dissenting Academies and in Scottish institutions is mirrored in the secondary education provided for dissenters' sons. We saw above that after 1779 dissenters were legally allowed to become school teachers. Over the next sixty years middle-class nonconformists had their sons educated in new private and proprietary schools, as well as some reformed grammar schools. They pressed for the same kind of broad curriculum that had been found in the Academies, in opposition to the narrow classical education of the grammar schools. Brian Simon (1960: 102-125: see also Roach (1986:

237)) gives a good account of these developments. He refers, for instance, to a report of 1834 about private schools in Manchester. Most had been established since 1820 and

> a high proportion of teachers were dissenters. An analysis of the curricula showed that the average boys' school provided teaching in reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, geography, history, mathematics and languages, up to the age of about fifteen. A few schools taught natural history and drawing and in some there was a little moral and religious teaching (p.113).

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 and1860s, 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 of 1864-8 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, among which dissenters were a prominent group. While 'second-grade' schools, for boys leaving at sixteen, were to have a curriculum based on Latin (but not Greek), English literature, political economy, mathematics and science, that of the 'third grade' ones, stopping at about fourteen, 'should include the elements of Latin or a modern language, English, history, elementary mathematics, geography and science '(op.cit.: 324).

The modern curriculum of the Prussian *Realschule* influenced the thinking of the commission, 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.

Thus, while the Clarendon Commission of 1861-4 decided that the education of the upper classes (including now many of the upper middle classes) in the major public schools should continue to be devoted largely to classics, the plan for the bulk of the middle classes continued to be based on the traditional broad curriculum deriving originally from the dissenting tradition. Although the Taunton proposals were not put into effect, the pull of this curriculum was so great by the 1860s that it had begun to make inroads into the great public schools themselves (Roach 1986:239). The Clarendon Report itself suggested that although classics (with history and divinity) was to have over 50% of curricular time, there should also be room for mathematics, natural science, French or German, and music or drawing (p.240).

By the end of the nineteenth century the so-called 'traditional' (ie Nonconformist) middle class had been joined by new middle class members from Anglican or secular backgrounds, although the two groups often kept apart in fairly self-contained social networks and remained so in places until the 1950s (McKibbin 1998: 91). The twentieth century entrenched the middle classes – increasingly diverse, as we have seen, in their composition, and increasingly secular after mid-century - in the political influence which they were beginning to attain by its early years. The 1906 election had returned 185 Nonconformist MPs, nearly all sympathetic to the new Liberal government (Binfield 1977: 207); with the decline of the Liberal Party after World War I, the middle classes gravitated largely to the Conservatives. 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.

In 1904 Morant created a gulf between the new local authority secondary schools and elementary schools. The secondary schools, as under the Taunton proposals, 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.

The reference here to girls' education deserves a comment. The 1904 scheme gives official blessing to the view that, at secondary level, girls

should follow the same curriculum as boys, except in practical subjects. For most of the late nineteenth century, middle class girls' education had been very different, orientated not towards scholarship but to their becoming 'decorative, modest and marriageable beings', and much of it taking place at home (Dyhouse 1981: 41-3). Even after 1904, in 1909, the regulations were changed so as to allow girls over fifteen to substitute domestic subjects for science and mathematics other than arithmetic (p165).

Elementary schools, catering for some 75% per cent of children, were obliged to follow a less intellectual curriculum, which included no science beyond nature study, no foreign language, but much emphasis on (gender-differentiated) manual subjects (Board of Education 1929). The core of the middle class was thus able to differentiate itself more adequately from those below it, scholarships for the more able of the latter providing a frail ladder upwards.

A similar academic curriculum, based on a by now traditional list of curriculum subjects, lived on vigorously through the twentieth century, at first in the selective secondary sector and then in much of the secondary comprehensive system which largely replaced this from the 1960s. From mid-century onwards many egalitarian educational thinkers wanted the working classes to enjoy the same curricular advantages as those from the élite. In some cases – as in my own – this desire was intensified by personal experience of upward social mobility via the 'ladder' of scholarships into élite schooling. Comprehensive schools were also the home of innumerable attempts to move away from a totally subject-based curriculum towards new forms of curricular arrangement with more appeal and relevance to the mass of children. The Schools Council played an important role here after 1964 (Bell and Prescott 1975).

In 1988 all innovation was blocked by the new National Curriculum, its ten compulsory subjects almost identical to Morant's in 1904, the only divergences being the inclusion of manual work/housewifery in 1904 and of technology and music in 1988 (Aldrich 1988: 22). Unlike in 1904, the broad compulsory curriculum was now for all children, 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. What had grown up in the eighteenth century as a curriculum suited to the religious beliefs of the minority community of Old Dissenters had become

three centuries later, and through various transformations, the taken-for-granted curriculum of the whole nation.

The traditional academic curriculum today

Many of us tend to take today's traditional school curriculum for granted, as we do ideas about pedagogy, timetabling and assessment which have become associated with it over the last three centuries.

On timetabling, see this example from Warrington Academy circa 1778:

[diagram to be inserted. See Warrington timetable jpg. Please head this Warrington Academy (in bold) and delete the words 'Appendix' and 'Warrington' down the side of the sheet. Please also add reference: McLachlan (1931:227)]

The similarity with a secondary school timetable today is remarkable. Time per day spent on studies may have been longer, but there is the same injection of knowledge in short bursts, with a shift to entirely different subject matter at the end of each period. (See also Comenius (1907) XXIX: 17). The Old Dissenters had their own rationale for this. It was partly about the least wasteful use of time – (on Puritan time-valuation, see Thompson 1982); and partly reflected the Ramist tradition of classifying knowledge and packaging it into easily learnable chunks.

Today's subject-based curriculum is one which makes a sharp distinction between mind and body, with physical education at its periphery. It is also centrally an *intellectual* curriculum, foregrounding subjects concerned with the pursuit of knowledge like mathematics, science, history and geography. Artistic subjects – literature, the visual arts and music – are mainly nineteenth century additions to a narrowly intellectual core and still play second fiddle to the knowledge-seeking subjects. We may not see the imagination and the emotions as 'springs of false judgements' as the Old Dissenters did, but they are still given less priority than knowledge acquisition. Of the artistic subjects, English Literature tends to be taken more seriously than the other two. This may be partly because it is more

easily assimilable to a knowledge-seeking subject. In secondary schools, to judge from examination and test items, eg questions on Shakespeare in the Key Stage 3 Literacy test, the intensity and delicacy of pupils' aesthetic response to drama, fiction and poetry are often rated less highly than their competence in evidence-based critical assessment.

Like the dissenters' curriculum of the eighteenth century, ours is dominated by non-instrumental goals. This is not to deny that, science, for example, is often studied with extrinsic aims in view. An upper secondary student may have her mind on doing physics at university or on a job in pharmaceuticals. Something of the same outlook, *ceteris paribus*, must have been true of some lay students of Warrington Academy. But the *intended* goal of science teaching among the dissenters – intended, that is, by the establishment, not necessarily by each student – was to reveal the manifold glory of God's creation. In our own age, defenders of a traditional curriculum are often equally attached to non-utilitarian aims. They hold science, history and mathematics to be significant achievements of human culture in their own right. Schools should, as their primary purpose, inculcate a love of learning, rather than to be vehicles of career advancement, citizenship, or self-exploration. (Sometimes, indeed, the term 'education' itself is defined in terms of intrinsic goods, with instrumental aims falling outside it, and belonging to 'training'). Examples of this non-instrumental way of thinking are found in the works of educational philosophers like Richard Peters (1966), Paul Hirst (1965; Hirst and Peters 1970), and Michael Oakeshott (1971) as well as later writers like Anthony O'Hear (1991: 43-5), although the last two of these have been more traditionalist about the curriculum than Peters and Hirst, who saw themselves as basing a broad, disciplines-focused, curriculum on rational principles rather than a respect for what has been. (On the indebtedness of 1960s philosophy of the curriculum to the dissenting tradition see White 2005).

In one way, this position is more purely non-instrumentally orientated than the dissenters'. Behind the latter, after all, there was an extrinsic consideration of a sort, and one of great importance. Knowledge of God's world was crucial in the dissenting thought-world as a necessary condition of personal salvation. This did not necessarily make salvation an acknowledged *aim* of education; indeed, to have done so would have been arrogant towards God himself, since salvation was in his gift alone. The more recent position lacks this ambiguous relationship to purposes, or

considerations, which lie beyond this. The learning is unalloyedly non-instrumental.

There are two more features which the modern subject-based curriculum shares with the dissenters'. First, the greater prestige given to more abstract subjects like mathematics and science. Logic was also prominent in the earlier curriculum, but its only counterpart today is in the 'thinking skills' which are now part of the official school curriculum. The second feature is the organisation of the curriculum around discrete subjects. There is no reason why it *has* to be arranged in this way, however inconceivable any departure from this may seem to some. The subject-basedness of the dissenting curriculum goes back to the Ramist project of dividing and subdividing areas of knowledge in neat, visually presentable, ways. Attempts during the late twentieth century to play up interrelationships between areas of knowledge and play down discreteness made little headway, finally foundering in Britain when the rigidly subject-based National Curriculum was made mandatory in 1988.

Conclusion

Although the role of the Dissenting Academies in originating the broad subject-based curriculum we have today may have been exaggerated, the broader thesis, that non-Anglican Protestant educational institutions – including those in Scotland as well as in England – play an important part in the story, is on stronger ground.

Two and a half centuries ago the academic subject-based curriculum had a clear rationale. A comprehensive understanding of the myriad features of God's created world, coherently marshalled under discrete, non-overlapping, subjects was seen as a necessary condition for one's own salvation. This justification has long since crumbled away and no compelling alternative has taken its place (White 2004). The groundlessness of the curriculum *status quo* is now, in 2005, becoming more evident – not least to those responsible for school curricula in different parts of the UK. There are a number of official initiatives at work which, while not denying the contribution that subject-teaching can make, begin their curriculum planning at a different point – with overall aims, not subjects. Northern Ireland and Scotland have already published schemes for aims-based curricula; and England is not far

behind. Sometime in the twenty-first century our eighteenth century curriculum may no longer have a future.

Note

This chapter is a modified version of Chapter 5 of my *Intelligence, Destiny and Education: the ideological roots of intelligence testing* London: Routledge (forthcoming).

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