

## Changing the subject: English in London, 1945 – 1967 (review article)

John Yandell\*

*Institute of Education, University of London*

Two recent books, *English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945-1965* and *The London Association for the Teaching of English, 1947-67: a history*, explore an important period in the development of English as a school subject and in the remaking of the professional identity of English teachers in London.

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Halfway through the one-year pre-service teacher education course on which I work, we ask our students to write an essay entitled ‘The Place of English.’ They are prompted to think about how English as a secondary school subject is constituted in the school in which they have spent their first 12-week practicum; they are also encouraged to draw on their own experiences of English, their own interests and enthusiasms, to consider how the subject might be differently imagined. We want our students to develop an understanding of English as constructed in history, shaped and reshaped over time by national and local policy but also by teachers, through the classroom practices that they have been observing and in which they have been participating. To open up the historical dimension, students explore in groups a variety of texts, reaching back from the most recent, a speech by Michael Gove, the then secretary of state for education, to an audience in Cambridge (Gove 2011), via extracts from the Cox (DES/Welsh Office 1989), Kingman (DES 1988), Norwood (BoE 1943) and Newbolt (BoE 1921) Reports, all the way to an extract from the 1862 Revised Code (Maclure 1976, 80). All of these texts present difficulties for our students, who are generally more conversant, from their undergraduate studies, with ways of reading literary texts (and it would probably be fair to say that many of them have a less than robust knowledge of the history of education). But they are usually able to make sense of these fragments of policy through the lens of their school experience, since current practice bears the legacy traces of earlier preoccupations, debates and discourses. The tabular representation of pupil progress in the Revised Code, for example, as well as its assumptions that such progress is both linear and demonstrable, have close parallels in current assessment grids and level descriptors, while the Newbolt Report’s emphasis on the separation of the literary from the linguistic

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\* Email: [j.yandell@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:j.yandell@ioe.ac.uk)

stands in a fairly clear relation to the latest insistence on the separation of ‘English Language’ from ‘English Literature’ in public examinations in this country.

There is, however, one extract that has tended to prove almost unreadable. It is a passage from the Bullock Report (DES 1975, 236-7), in a section dealing with organisational matters. It makes the case, rather gently and almost tentatively, for the value of a coherent approach to planning and teaching across an English department and for this coherence to be reflected in, or perhaps enacted through, the construction and continual revision of a departmental ‘instrument of policy.’ The gist of the argument is contained in a single paragraph:

15.30 We believe with our witnesses that every English department should produce a document making clear its purposes and the means it proposes to fulfil them. We have already argued that the head of department should create a climate in which there is continuing professional discussion among his colleagues. He should encourage them to share with him the responsibility for keeping up with new developments and knowledge, for a dialogue which fashions the English teaching in a school needs to be an informed dialogue. We believe that the thinking that emerges from it should take shape in a manifesto, reflecting the spirit and purpose of the department and responsive to the continuing exchange of views within it. We suggest that the term ‘instrument of policy’ would represent this more accurately than ‘syllabus’ or ‘scheme of work’. We envisage it as a cumulative and slowly changing document, from which loose-leaf sections are withdrawn for revision as the department’s ideas evolve. Its first purpose is to support the English teacher in the classroom, but those who devise it should also bear in mind its importance for the head and other colleagues in the school, for new teachers, students on teaching practice and their tutors, and for outside advisers. The document should contain a clear account of the aims and purposes of the department and of the balance of activities designed to fulfil them, and it might include an anthology of teaching ideas, an outline of any specific points which the department has agreed should be taught, the administrative procedure for stock, pupil records etc, and lists of books and other material available. Such a document would help teachers give shape, coherence and sequence to the work they devise for the pupils. (DES 1975, 237)

Earlier paragraphs note evidence of incoherence – of staff doing their own thing, ‘living from hand to mouth, hoping that something one week will trigger something for the next week’ (DES 1975, 236) as one teacher put it – as well as of a lack of discussion among colleagues, a lack of sharing, whether of aims and purposes, or of pedagogic approaches, or of resources.

What makes this passage unreadable for our students is that the context for the Bullock Report’s modest proposal is so different from current realities as to be unimaginable. Most of them were not born when the National Curriculum was first imposed on schools in England and Wales (DES/Welsh Office 1989). Their entire experience of schooling has been in a period of centrally-prescribed curricular content and of centrally-determined aims, a period in which government and its agencies have also become increasingly *dirigiste* on questions of pedagogy. Our students struggle to conceive of a moment at which a government-sponsored report could mildly suggest that each English department might consider arriving at, and documenting, its own collective picture of what English should look like, in its particular

context; they struggle to comprehend that teachers ever had such agency, such responsibility, such powers of professional judgement and decision-making.

English departments still exist today, of course, but their role is, generally speaking, much diminished: they function as administrative units in a centrally-managed system, not as the collaborative, decision-making collectives envisaged by the Bullock Report – and experienced, at least to some extent, by those of us who worked in schools before the arrival of the standards-based reforms. I confess that I had assumed that departments had always existed – that their existence was coterminous with secondary schooling itself. One of the findings to emerge from *English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945-1965* (Medway et al. 2014) is that departments were, in effect, an invention of the second half of the 1950s.

This was most conspicuously the case at Walworth, one of the three schools that form the focus of the research. Whereas the other two (Hackney Downs and Minchenden) were, throughout the two decades covered, selective grammar schools, Walworth was one of a small handful of experimental comprehensives, established as part of the London Plan (LCC 1947), the London County Council's ambitious response to the 1944 Education Act. Unlike most local authorities, the LCC rejected the 1944 Act's tripartite system of secondary education – the assumption that there were three types of pupil, and hence that there should be three types of secondary school. As Anne O'Reilly, headteacher at Walworth from 1947 to 1955, told a reporter in 1951: 'After all, remember, we don't have election meetings, radio, cinemas and the rest of it for the able and the less able. We find that in the Comprehensive School the less able children thrive immensely' (Medway et al. 2014, 157). It is a magnificent statement, one that locates the commitment to comprehensive education within a nexus of ideas about schooling and society, about democratic entitlement and participation in a common culture.

To gain a sense of what English was like at Walworth (and at the other two schools), the researchers gathered data from interviews with former pupils and teachers, emails and written submissions, as well as documentary evidence in the form of exercise books, meeting notes, staff bulletins and teachers' mark books. One of the remarkable features of this research is just how much stuff Medway, Hardcastle and their team have been able to accumulate: they acknowledge that they have been somewhat overwhelmed, both by the readiness of former pupils to come forward and share their experiences and by the numbers of exercise books and other relics of school life that have been stored away for half a century or more. And yet, of course, such data are always and inevitably partial (what of all the other pupils, the other

exercise books, the teachers whose presence in these three schools remains shadowy, at best?). Indeed, the authors make the point that part of what their research contributes to curriculum history and to the history of English teaching is its emphasis on ‘how complex and difficult to interpret the reality of education in the past is’ (Medway et al. 2014, 176).

Nonetheless, the story of English at Walworth that Medway et al. tell is one of a very sharp contrast within the period studied. Arthur Harvey, head of English from 1949 to 1955, is the first teacher at Walworth about whom the researchers have been able to find out very much. He was, it would appear, a charismatic, inspirational figure, determined to bring literary culture to (some of) his students, both in class and in after-school meetings of the Manuscript Club, a group of favoured older boys, in the Quick Service Cafe on the Old Kent Road. There is, however, little evidence of his impact on pupils beyond the top stream, and little evidence of coherent work across a department. (What is suggested, in other words, is not unlike the situation that the Bullock Report was addressing two decades later.) All of this was to change with the arrival, in 1956, of Harold Rosen. Here was a head of department who took seriously both stock-taking and his role in supporting colleagues, who saw it as his ‘responsibility to promote the work of the whole department’ (Medway et al. 2014, 89). Rosen also had an entirely different conception of what English was, and of how the subject stood in relation to the linguistic resources that Walworth’s working-class pupils brought with them. Here is the opening of the syllabus that Rosen produced in 1958:

The teaching of English at Walworth calls for a sympathetic understanding of the pupils’ environment and temperament. Their language experience is acquired from their environment and from communication with the people who mean most to them. This highly localised language is likely to stand out in their own minds in strong contrast to the language experience being consciously presented in the framework of English lessons in particular and school work in general. (Medway et al. 2014, 90)

This is, quite clearly, more than a syllabus – more than a list of books to be read, or skills to be acquired. It is, in the terms of the Bullock Report, ‘an instrument of policy’ – and a quite remarkable one at that. It marks not just the beginning of a new era at one school but a radically different conception of English curriculum and pedagogy, a conception that was not merely attentive to local circumstances, to the language, culture and experience of the pupils, but rather sought to construct a version of English from these foundations. And the work that was started by Harold Rosen was continued into the 1960s by other colleagues – John Dixon, Alex McLeod, Simon Clements, Leslie Stratta – who shared his understanding that the working-class children who arrived at Walworth brought with them not a set of deficits but linguistic and cultural resources, out of which a new English might be fashioned.

Perhaps more puzzling is the fact that a similar reconfiguration of English happened in Minchenden, a grammar school in a largely middle-class suburb. At Minchenden, there were no obvious external drivers creating the need for change: it was conventionally successful, popular, thriving – and the issues of class, culture and language that Rosen had taken as the starting point for his Walworth syllabus were simply not pressing ones in the very different environment of a North London grammar school. Nevertheless, the arrival in 1959 of Douglas Barnes as head of department marked a profound change in English teaching at Minchenden. As at Walworth, this change involved both a transformation of the organisation and social relations of the English department and a fundamental rethinking of the English curriculum. Barnes initiated regular departmental meetings, held sometimes at the school but more often in his own home:

We used to have these meetings, and I would ask one member of the department to introduce something about, say, personal writing, or poetry, and we would take off from there into a general discussion, and I would be taking notes, and I would type it up, and it would become a revision or an addition to the English syllabus. We all had files in which we put sheets of the curriculum as it developed. (Medway et al. 2014, 128-9)

It is tempting at this moment to recall a line from *Monty Python*: ‘Tell that to the youth of today and they won’t believe you.’ Of course, what Barnes describes is precisely what the Bullock Report was subsequently to propose as an approach to be adopted more widely. Through such meetings, developing a culture of sharing both resources and approaches to using them in the classroom, English teachers at Minchenden constructed what they called a ‘rolling curriculum’, a curriculum that no longer took as its starting-point an already-existing literary canon but rather the learners’ experience. This was a collaborative project, one in which teachers had real agency and one that was about much more than a transformation in English teaching methods: what was being accomplished entailed ‘changes in *aims* as much as in methods, a matter of working towards different *ends* and a different notion of what English was *for*’ (Medway et al. 2014, 166).

This transformation was not happening in all schools, and certainly not in the period covered by *English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy*. Although its authors observe some changes in English teaching at Hackney Downs, including evidence of much more extensive, dialogic marking of pupils’ work than might have been expected as well as some moves towards a more coherent approach to the planning of sequences of lessons, the larger shifts happened later, in the wake of its reopening as a comprehensive school. But the English departments at Walworth and Minchenden were not simply oases of progressive practice.

The teachers there were actively involved in wider networks, the most important of which was the London Association for the Teaching of English.

Simon Gibbons' (2013) history of LATE's first twenty years does an important job in providing this broader context and in conveying a sense of the scope of what was achieved. From its inception in 1947, LATE established a way of working that was collaborative, participatory and classroom-focused. Issues were explored through study groups, meetings and weekend conferences, and discussions were carefully recorded and disseminated. Existing pedagogic practice was problematised: investigations were conducted into reading comprehension and the marking of imaginative writing, and a successful battle with the London Board led to the introduction of an alternative English Language O-level syllabus and exam paper. Alongside this work of research and campaigning was a shared engagement in literary and cultural activity – a strand in LATE's work that Tony Burgess has described as 'self-educative' (Gibbons 2013, 40).

What is most striking about Gibbons' account is the ambitiousness of the project that LATE's work represents. Its members set about the task of developing a body of ideas that might function as an adequate rationale for the practice of English teaching. This task involved asking big questions about English as a school subject: about the relationship between language and literature, about the place of film and television in the English curriculum, about children's reading and writing, and about assessment. But it also involved an engagement with territory beyond the disciplinary boundaries of English – with sociology and developmental psychology – precisely because of LATE members' awareness of the scale of the intellectual challenge that confronted them as teachers of English. If English were reducible neither to the transmission and appreciation of canonical literature nor to exercises in parsing and précis, if it involved an attentiveness to difference, to the different resources of culture, language and experience that children and young people brought with them into the classroom, then it was necessary to find out more about the world in which they lived (and hence a conference, in 1958, on 'English and the Urban Child') and about how learning happened (and thus a conference the following year on 'The Part Played by Language in Children's Development: Some Evidence from Psychology'). As Gibbons observes, LATE's programme represents a rather more demanding – and fulfilling – version of professional development than much that passes for in-service training in the twenty-first-century landscape. Quite clearly, it was predicated on a very different conception of teacher identity.

*English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy* and Gibbons' history of LATE are not, of course, just stories of key figures in the changing landscape of English in education. Both

these complementary pieces of research contribute to our understanding of the more general shift in social relations within which the pedagogic relations of schooling were implicated. The shift is marked in the distance between the image of Arthur Harvey, inducting his chosen acolytes into the mysteries of literary culture in the Quick Service Cafe down the Old Kent Road, and the accounts that Medway et al. provide of later, much more informal interactions between teachers and their students – conversations about shared musical interests, for example. Here are two former Walworth pupils recalling such experiences:

*Johnson:* Suddenly these people were kind of pushing the boundaries of what we regarded as normal teaching.

*Groombridge:* Normal – didn't seem like schoolwork, it was what you wanted to do, it was culture. (Medway et al. 2014, 186)

In recent years, it has become fashionable to disparage education in the postwar years, to compare it unfavourably with what has been achieved in the new era of standards-based reforms. The trend was started by Tony Blair, who dismissed 'the outdated mass production approach that too often characterised public services after 1945' (Blair 2002, 5). It has been taken up by the current Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, who has been keen to share his own recollections of London schools in the bad old days of progressivism, the approaches to education that were heralded by developments at Minchenden and Walworth in the late fifties and early sixties:

Our education system is much better because of greater accountability in the system. Those who think we haven't made progress need to remember what it was like before Ofsted. I certainly do. In the seventies and eighties, when I worked in places like Peckham, Bermondsey, Hackney and West Ham, whole generations of children and young people were failed.

The school where I was head before moving to Ofsted, Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, stands on the site of Hackney Downs School, which in its day represented the worst excesses of that period. But there would have been many others just as bad that never hit the headlines and got away with blue murder. (Wilshaw 2012, 2)

As both these books demonstrate, the Blair-Wilshaw version of history is a travesty that traduces the contribution of those teachers – large numbers of them – who responded with real intellectual energy and political commitment to the challenges presented by social change and by new, more inclusive, forms of schooling. As Peter Medway suggests:

In most schools in the 50s it would have been just a job, you did the hours, not something you got particularly involved or committed to. But suddenly in places like Walworth and some other places teachers stopped behaving like that and started saying 'No, this is serious stuff.' (Gibbons 2013, 91)

Times have changed. The accountability regimes that are lauded by Wilshaw have teachers in thrall. And yet LATE continues to thrive, attracting to its meetings and conferences new English teachers whose professional identity and practice cannot quite be contained within the confines of the new managerialism. As these histories remind us, such teachers are heirs to a rich legacy.

### Notes on contributor

John Yandell is the editor of *Changing English*. He taught in inner London secondary schools for twenty years before moving to the Institute of Education, University of London, where he has led the Secondary English and English with Drama PGCE course for the past eleven years. Recent publications include *The Social Construction of Meaning: reading literature in urban English classrooms* (Routledge, 2013).

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