

The impact of policy on teacher education and literacy education in England:  
some notes from a corner of a small island

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Abstract: This chapter focuses attention on policy in England, and particularly on recent attempts to refashion both curricular content and pedagogic identities. These changes are seen as counter-revolutionary, an intervention by culturally conservative policy-makers to reverse the gains of the preceding, more progressive era. The analysis of policy is framed by vignettes of practice, from 1985 to the present, from which the reader is invited to conclude that schools remain both sites of struggle and places of possibility.

**Key words:** policy, curriculum, pedagogy, standards, literacy, teacher education, teacher formation

I started teaching in 1985, in a boys' comprehensive school in East London. With a class of 14- and 15-year-olds, I decided to read John Steinbeck's (1948) *The Pearl*. The experience was, as far as I can recollect it, an unmitigated disaster, for a multitude of reasons. I found it painfully difficult to establish myself as a teacher in this environment. This was, I'm sure, because the 'normal' challenges of classroom management that confront most new teachers were intensified by the fractured and fractious nature of the class. About half the students were from the long-established, white, working-class community that had grown up around the London docklands; the other half of the class were of Bangladeshi heritage, mainly fairly recent arrivals in the UK. Most of the white students were openly

hostile towards their Bangladeshi peers: a current of racism, which frequently found violent expression on the streets around the school, permeated the day-to-day exchanges in the classroom. “I’m not sitting next to him – he smells of curry!” “Why are you working him, sir?” Entangled in all of this was the way that gender was performed in the school at large. This was a boys’ school, where almost all the established, senior teachers were (white) men, where order was enforced through displays of masculine power. I wasn’t very clear about the kind of teacher I wanted to be, but I was utterly sure about the kind of teacher I didn’t want to be. I cannot fully reconstruct my reasons for choosing to read *The Pearl* with this class. There were enough copies of it, it was sufficiently brief to be manageable – and it wasn’t *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck 1937), which I had vowed to avoid at all costs, on the grounds that it seemed to me to offer far too much succour to the racist and misogynist attitudes that were already so firmly entrenched in the class. So I settled on *The Pearl*. My students didn’t hate it; they found it too stultifyingly dull, too meaningless an experience to warrant anything as lively as hatred. Decades later, I came across Charles Sarland’s (1991) account of another class’s struggles with *The Pearl*. Sarland’s categorisation of this reading experience, “On not finding yourself in the text”, rang painfully true.

Things improved markedly when we moved onto *Boys from the Blackstuff*, Alan Bleasdale’s elegiac and often bitterly funny sequence of five interlinked television plays, with their representation of working-class life in Liverpool in a period of savage economic decline. We read the scripts (Bleasdale 1985) in class, watched videotapes of the television performances (Saville 1982), talked and wrote about the characters, their relationships, dilemmas and difficulties, their choices and their lack of choices. My students were interested, engaged,

enjoying themselves in English lessons – and my relationship with the class, though still often fraught, improved. This was not all to do with the text. I have a particularly fond memory of a lesson which had started with one of the students retrieving a pink fluffy toy animal from the flat roof below the windows at the back of the room. He threw the toy at me, and I conceived of the idea that the rest of the lesson would best be delivered in role, through the persona of the toy in my hand. Somehow the pink fluffy thing enabled us all to get along much more amicably than was usually the case. But the change of text did make a difference.

I wanted to share *Boys from the Blackstuff* with the class because it was a text that mattered to me. Watching the plays when they were first broadcast (1982), I had been transfixed by the way that they represented working-class lives and social relations in Britain under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government: here there was no trace of condescension but plenty of anger and an enduring political commitment to the importance of social solidarity. The plays spoke to me, and I hoped that they would speak to my students, too. I think they did. It helped, of course, that my students' reading of the scripts was enhanced by their viewing of the plays – that their experience of the text was of different instantiations of the text, in different multimodal configurations. I would also want to suggest that their experience of the text involved a kind of recognition, a sense that these were recognisable figures in a recognisable landscape: a different docklands, and one fictively framed and re-imagined, but recognisable nonetheless in its representation of a particular kind of struggle with the material conditions of existence.

A recognition, but also, perhaps, a transformation. Earlier in 1985, while completing my PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education, a preservice teacher education course), I had first encountered the Bullock Report's declaration:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart (DES 1975, p. 286).

I have written elsewhere (Yandell 2010) about my shifting understanding of what these words might mean, my gradual recognition that this was not simply an ethical obligation on the part of teachers to respect the diverse backgrounds, cultures and values of their students but also a pedagogic imperative, an assertion of the practical futility of treating learners as blank slates, of the necessity of remaining attentive to the funds of knowledge that learners bring with them to the classroom. From the start with this class, there was no question of students casting off the values of their homes. As I have indicated above, there was nothing cosy about this. The white students were not about to leave their racist and xenophobic attitudes outside the classroom, however much I might have wanted them to. Here, though, in my students' acts of making meaning from Bleasdale's plays, something was happening that enabled me to work towards a different reading of Bullock. Above, I have suggested that *Boys from the Blackstuff* might have functioned as a locus of recognition, a meeting-point of different but familiar cultures, and hence a place where everyday and curricularised perspectives might be brought into a more productive relationship (rather than the hopeless separation of perspectives that we endured while reading *The*

*Pearl*). The text becomes something different, acquires new configurations of meaning, each time it is read and re-read. My students' reading was thus a remaking of *Boys from the Blackstuff*; it seemed to me that it also offered the possibility of a remaking of my students. The world that Bleasdale represents is very largely, as the title might suggest, the social relations of working-class men. The versions of masculinity that it offers, though, are complicated, problematic and in flux. They are, of necessity, renegotiated in the new economic conditions of recession, unemployment and ever more precarious casual employment; and the values that the plays uphold are very far indeed from those of aggressive, individualist hypermasculinity. My students' explorations of the text opened up a space in which it became possible for them to explore and renegotiate their own identities: I would want to suggest that, because the text offered different subjectivities, different possibilities of selfhood, they were able to begin to find different versions of themselves in the text.

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I have started with this attempt to reconstruct a moment in my own formation as an English teacher, a moment from the long-gone, pre-digital days, in the hope that it might enable me both to consider more clearly what is happening now, and also to recognise the complexity and contingency of the impact that policy has on practice. I would want to suggest that policy, in the form of the Bullock Report, had an influence on me, alerting me to the issue of the relation between the culture(s) of schooling and the culture(s) of the home and of the street. But this was no one-way street: policy, at least in this incarnation, was no script to follow, no manual providing step-by-step instructions for the classroom. Practice

was in a dialectical relationship with policy, so that what I understood by the words in the Bullock Report changed in the light of experience and my reflection on experience.

It would be possible, too, to interpret my anecdote as an indictment of teacher education in those days before we had competences and standards for teachers, before we had statutorily enforced national curricula, before government ministers and chief inspectors held forth on the vital importance of behavior management (DfE 2010; Adams 2014). It would be possible to do so, but very silly. It wasn't because I was inadequately prepared that I struggled with that class; it was because I was well prepared that I was able to recognise, and perhaps even begin to address, some of the complexities, contradictions and objective difficulties of the circumstances in which I found myself. So my preparedness, I would argue, was not of a technical-rationalist kind, to do with the implementation of routines and procedures devised and approved by others; rather, it entailed the exercise of particular kinds of professional judgement and reflexivity (Moore 2004, Heilbronn 2010). A crucial part of the story is that change – developmental change in me as a teacher, in my relationships with my students, in my students' language and literacies – happened gradually, uncertainly, over quite extensive periods of time, and not, as much of currently fashionable policy might suggest, within the confines of a single lesson.

That was then; this is now. I want to move on to consider the new policy terrain, first of literacy education and then of teacher education (though, of course, the two are not entirely distinct). My focus will be on policy in England,<sup>i</sup> some

aspects of which are replicated throughout much of the Anglophone world, other aspects of which, particularly in relation to literacy education, are *sui generis* (and of a very strange kind, too).

We have recently been presented with a new national curriculum in England, the fifth version in the twenty-five years since one was first imposed in this country. As its overarching statement indicates, this is a twenty-first-century curriculum that takes us firmly back to the nineteenth century:

The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement (DfE 2014, p. 6).

Culture here is not the plural, shifting entity of the Bullock Report, and it is certainly not something that learners might bring with them to the classroom from their lives and experiences beyond the school gates and from the practices and values of their homes and communities. Culture here is the Arnoldian bulwark against anarchy, the means whereby schooling might civilise, or at least domesticate, the masses (Arnold 1869/1993). For Michael Gove, the Conservative education minister who was the architect of this version of the national curriculum, as for Matthew Arnold, the question of value is straightforward and the task of the school is equally unproblematic. The “best that has been thought and said” has already been established: the canon is in place. All that remains is for it to be introduced to those who might otherwise remain in ignorance of it. As the mention of “essential knowledge” indicates, this

is Matthew Arnold by way of E. D. Hirsch (1987, 1996) – a curriculum predicated on a view of knowledge as fixed, already-established, already-organised, and ready to be delivered. Questions of pedagogy and of learning – the questions that are absolutely central to what goes on, or might be accomplished, in the classroom – have been evacuated from this *ex cathedra* curriculum. The sheer quality of the thoughts and words to which the pupils are introduced will, presumably, be sufficient to “engender ... appreciation”. And that, equally clearly, is the role assigned to the learners in this process: they are to bow down and worship before the shrine of high culture. They are to be taught to know their place as passive recipients of others’ (unattainable) creativity and achievement. The cultural conservatism that informs this statement of aims leaves its indelible mark on the detail of the English curriculum. This, for example, is the content that is specified for 14- to 16-year-olds’ work in literature:

Students should study a range of high quality, intellectually challenging, and substantial whole texts in detail. These must include:

- at least one play by Shakespeare
- at least one 19th century novel
- a selection of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry
- fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards.

All works should have been originally written in English (DfE 2013a, p. 4)

I confess that I find it hard to read such a list without becoming paralysed by the sheer arbitrariness of the criteria that are deployed. Why 1789? Why exclude



Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Jonson, Milton, Bradstreet, Cowper (and anyone else writing before the French Revolution)? I suspect 1789 was lit upon simply because it's the year of publication of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, but this is not, of course, made explicit. Why, in any case, should Romantic poetry be singled out for such special treatment? Why does it matter where fiction or drama was produced? Why is Ireland permitted, but not any of the other former colonies? And which fiction is "from" the British Isles? Does this mean that Salman Rushdie is in, but Arundhati Roy, Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are out? And why this blanket ban on literature in translation? If you decide that it is important that all 14- 16-year-olds read a nineteenth century novel, and I am slightly mystified as to why you would make that decision, why is it better for them to read Trollope than Tolstoy?

What does "representative" mean? Who decides which texts are "high quality", or "intellectually challenging", or even "substantial"? The answer, quite obviously, is: *not* teachers. Every item in the stipulations of content quoted above reveals a fear about what might happen if schools, teachers and their students were left to their own devices to make locally appropriate choices about the content of a literature curriculum. Presumably, in such impossible-to-imagine circumstances, we would end up with students reading and experiencing:

- a range of drama, but not necessarily Shakespeare
- fiction that had been written in the last 100 years or so
- modern poems and lyrics
- literature from around the world.

The students might even become involved in debates, not only about their own reading preferences but also about questions of value, about which texts they had read that they considered significant, or that they would recommend to someone else to read, and their reasons for making these judgements. In such circumstances, they might even be in a position to explore the category of literature itself. Would such a curriculum lack intellectual challenge?

The Hirschian orientation of our latest national curriculum is equally apparent in what is excluded or marginalised. What matters is what endures, the heritage of language and literature that is “every child’s birthright” (Gove 2010) and hence, it would seem, the most bankable form of cultural capital that schooling has to offer. The primacy of the written (or printed) word is announced in the repeated misquoting of Arnold’s “the best that has been thought and said” as “the best that has been thought and written” (DfE 2013a, p. 3; see also Gove 2013, 2014).

Though oracy has not been removed entirely, it now occupies a much diminished space. In all four earlier incarnations of the English national curriculum, it appeared as “speaking and listening” – a heading that, for all its ungainliness, nonetheless promised some recognition of the essentially social, reciprocal nature of talk. In all these previous versions, the assessment of oracy counted: it contributed to students’ overall English GCSE grades, and hence, given the overweening importance of such high-stakes tests, was given official acknowledgement as an important constituent of subject English. Now “speaking and listening” has been replaced by “spoken English”, a poor shrivelled thing that promises little more than a passing interest in the arts of public speaking and the further fetishising of spoken Standard English (DfE 2013b, pp. 3, 5). And it – the use of talk – will contribute nothing to the students’ final grades.

If little attention is to be paid to talk, even less is afforded to the semiotic resources of new digital literacies. In the new national curriculum for English, there is no mention of media, new or old, no mention of the screen as a site of semiotic practice, no mention of new technologies that might have had an impact on literacy practices. (There is, though, a requirement that “All schools must publish their school curriculum by subject and academic year online” [DfE 2014, p. 5].) There is, in short, precious little in the English curriculum that would have been out of place in a curriculum document written fifty or a hundred years ago. That, in the world beyond the school gates, the landscape of symbolisation, representation and communication has been profoundly changed, seems to have escaped the notice of those responsible for the formulation of these instruments of policy. Except that this is not an oversight, a failure to register that things have moved on: it is a deliberate and conscious declaration that these changes are irrelevant to schooling. Since education is recast as an induction into an unchanging, always-valorised collection of cultural objects (“the best that has been thought and written”), there can be no good reason to waste time on those artefacts, those means of communication and cultural making, that are new-fangled and of merely transient appeal. So, for example, the specifications for English Language GCSE include the declaration that “Texts that are essentially transient, such as instant news feeds, must not be included” (DfE 2013b, p. 4).

In this respect, as in others, the counter-revolution in policy (Jones 2013) has been pushed further in England than in most other parts of the world. If the last Conservative government in this country was wont to express a longing for a return to Victorian values, this one seems determined to enforce a resumption of Victorian literacy practices. It will, I imagine, only be a matter of time before the

instruction is issued that school desks be refashioned to accommodate inkwells. Michael Gove was insistent that his changes to school curricula and to the accompanying assessment regimes were informed by a desire to (re-)introduce rigour into the system (Yandell 2014). But it is a very odd notion of rigour that creates so absolute a separation between school literacy and the practices in which learners participate in their daily lives. Rigour here has become *rigor mortis*, turning policy into the sclerotic product of nostalgic fantasy.

We have come a very long way indeed from the Bullock Report. School students must now be expected to act as though home and school represented two entirely separate cultures. This lesson is one to be learnt very early on in their experience of schooling. The insistence on phonics as the one true path that all early readers must follow is enshrined in the national curriculum (DfE 2014, pp. 20-1), in the “phonics screening check” that must be administered to all six year-olds (Standards and Testing Agency 2014) and in the *Teachers’ Standards* (DfE 2011, p. 11), where it is stipulated that the way in which teachers of early reading must demonstrate their “good curriculum and subject knowledge” is through showing their “clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics”. Thus all the complexity and diversity of literacy practices in homes and communities, explored in any number of carefully researched and endlessly illuminating ethnographic accounts (Brice Heath 1983; Gonzalez et al. 2005; Gregory 1996; Gregory and Williams 2000; Minns 1997; Street 2001), are reduced to a very simple process: learning to make the right noises when confronted with marks on a page. As the national curriculum emphasises, this process is a strictly linear, sequential one: the squiggles on the page, and the accompanying sounds, have to be taught (and hence learnt) in a specified order.

In this paradigm of what is involved in the acquisition of literacy, a child's other experiences of literate practice, whether on a screen or on a cereal packet, are to be construed as nothing more than interference (Davis 2012; Yandell 2012).

How, then, do such modern policies construe the role of the teacher? Once grapheme-phoneme correspondences have been internalised, what else must teachers know and do if they and their students are to thrive? Throughout the term of the current government, considerable emphasis has been placed on the importance of behavior management. In this, as in the politics of the curriculum, there has been a determination to cast aside the vestiges of progressive or liberal practice and attitudes. The 2010 policy statement, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010), might almost have been re-titled "the importance of discipline", with its promise to speed up the processes whereby students could be excluded from schools and to "increase the authority of teachers to discipline pupils by strengthening their powers to search pupils, issue detentions and use force where necessary" (DfE 2010: 32). As Robert Scholes has observed, exploring the etymological roots of the word "canon", its history is just as closely implicated in the exercise of disciplinary power as is its cognate, the cane (Scholes 1998, pp. 104-5).

The formation of teachers is to be policed through a single set of *Teachers' Standards* (DfE 2011), standards that themselves insist on teachers' role in the maintenance of ("high") standards of linguistic propriety. Thus, a teacher must:

... demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use

of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject. (DfE 2011, p. 11)

In policy documents from the Bullock Report onwards, the term "Standard English" has been made to fulfil a bewildering multiplicity of functions. Tony Crowley points to the slippage between Standard English as a particular written form, with its origins in a single dialect of Middle English, and an always ill-defined notion of a spoken standard:

"Standard English" refers to the universal written code of English, a specific spoken form of the language, or both at the same time since they are largely the same thing in any case. "Standard" in the sense of the written code presumably means uniform or common. "Standard" in the second sense cannot mean uniform or common. What then can it mean? (Crowley 2003, p. 256)

There are two longstanding (and equally unsatisfactory, equally circular) definitions of the spoken standard, both of which have appeared repeatedly in policy: one seeks to identify the standard by the absence of non-standard features; the other, which is traceable back to the emergence of the category in the nineteenth century, locates it in the speech of an educated person (a role model, such as that of the teacher in the current version of the *Teachers' Standards*). As Crowley notes, policy displays "a remarkable confidence that what the term means is 'commonsensically' clear to everybody" (2003, p. 258; see also Yandell 2013).

If the curriculum is a fixed canon of heritage texts and an insistence on the primacy of a particular dialect of English, then that is where final authority lies

(the authority of the “best that has been thought and said”), while the teachers’ authority is acquired from knowledge of this canon, this variety of language, and from their institutional position. When I reflect on my experiences as a newly-qualified teacher, I am not sure that any of this would have been very helpful, to me or to my students. Should I have worried less about what my students were saying, and more about the differences between their speech and some notion of a spoken standard? Would I have been a better teacher if I had issued more detentions, or used force (where necessary)? I don’t think so. I’d prefer to put my faith in small pink fluffy animals.

The final section of the *Teachers’ Standards*, “Personal and professional conduct”, states that teachers:

- ... uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behavior, within and outside school, by ...
- not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs
  - ensuring that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils’ vulnerability or might lead them to break the law. (DfE 2011, p. 14)

To clarify what is meant by “fundamental British values”, the Preamble to the *Standards* states that the phrase “is taken from the definition of extremism as articulated in the new Prevent Strategy” (DfE 2011, p. 9). According to the *Prevent Strategy*, extremism is “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values” (Home Department 2011, p. 107). So we have a simple binary: extremism

or British values. And we have a policy document, regulating the work of teachers, that locates such work, by implication, in the context of the government's counterterrorist strategy (Home Department 2011, p. 23), and its declared assessment that the most serious threat to the UK is that "from Al Qa'ida, its affiliates and like-minded organisations" (Home Department 2011, p. 13; see also Turvey et al. 2014). I continue to struggle with the sheer oddness of an attempt by the state to prescribe appropriate attitudes and behaviors for teachers primarily by reference to questions of terrorism and national security. And I am not sure that this regulation is any more helpful to the development of teacher professionalism in the twenty-first century than it would have been to me in the 1980s (a time when Nelson Mandela's ANC was described as "a typical terrorist organization" by the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher [Bevans and Streeter 1996]).

Back in 1985, on my PGCE course, I wrestled with the Althusserian notion of schooling as (merely) an arm of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1971). It seemed to me then to be too deterministic – and too simple – a model, taking insufficient account of the contradictions in education. England's new version of *Teachers' Standards* might encourage an Althusserian reading, given the way in which it positions teachers as a kind of plain clothes police force, upholding the rule of law and snuffing out the first flickers of extremist sentiment. It would be foolish to imagine that this attempt to reconfigure teacher professionalism will have no impact. It threatens to diminish the space for open and honest debate. But it would be equally misguided to assume that the complicated, messy reality of classroom interaction can be read off from the dictates of policy. Schools are still, sometimes simultaneously, places of coercion and emancipation; they



remain sites of struggle (Gramsci 1971; Giroux 2002). The agency of teachers and students is not so easily effaced by the imposition of curricula, by regimes of performativity (Ball 2008) and managerialist regulation.

Policy has its effects, but spaces remain for teachers and their students to exploit. These spaces are ones in which more heterodox literacy practices can thrive – practices which point up the shortcomings of policy. I want to conclude by mentioning two such approaches to literacy education.

The first is a recent, and utterly fascinating, study of the use of educational blogs in three south London primary schools (Barrs and Horrocks 2014). The researchers were principally interested in the difference between the writing that the children produced in their blogs in comparison with what they wrote in their schoolbooks. The project's starting-point was that digital technology is changing literacy, and that therefore teachers have a responsibility to be interested in the possibilities and affordances of the new forms of writing that are already a part of everyday practice. As one of the teachers involved in the project put it: "Digital literacy gives writing a whole new dimension which primary children must be exposed to; it is, after all, their future" (Barrs and Horrocks 2014, p. 3). And, as the researchers concluded, "Both the interactive nature of blogging and the wider audience that it gave access to were pivotal in transforming children's relationship to writing" (Barrs and Horrocks 2014, p. 38).

The second is a project in a single secondary school, also in south London. It involved groups of school pupils in collaboration with students on our pre-service teacher education course. Working together, they used tablet computers

to make, edit and present a series of short films. The films were the pupils' responses to a literary text, Poe's "The Raven" (Bryer, Lindsay and Wilson 2014). The quality of the pupils' engagement in this project supports David Buckingham's argument about the potential gains of new, and newly accessible, digital technologies:

By offering greater democratic access to complex forms of media production, digital technology truly does enable students to become writers as well as readers of visual and audio-visual media - and indeed, begins to blur these settled distinctions. And it may be that the ability to manipulate and edit moving images in digital format offers a degree of flexibility and control that particularly lends itself to the kind of self-conscious reflection that I have argued is essential to media education and to "critical literacy" more broadly.

(Buckingham 2003: 186)

Both of these projects reveal teachers and their students moving far beyond the reductiveness of the curricular and pedagogic prescriptions of policy. Here we see learners working with – and benefitting from – a much more expansive view of literacy, one that recognises the value of new technologies of symbolisation, representation and communication and enables the learners to draw on the full multimodal repertoire of cultural resources that they have at their disposal. Whether the educational potential of such new technologies is realised is dependent, as David Buckingham insisted, on what teachers do with them: it is a question of pedagogy. Now, just as much as in 1985, teachers have choices about what is brought into the classroom, on whose terms and for what purposes.

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<sup>i</sup> In what follows, I focus on policy within the state system in England (though to refer to a system at all is to misrepresent a situation that is both highly stratified and increasingly incoherent). In each of the other countries of the United Kingdom, the relationship between government policy and curriculum has been a somewhat different one. For an account of these differences, see Jones (2003).