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**School curriculum corrupted by politics**

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The school curriculum has been corrupted by political interference, according to a new report from independent think-tank Civitas. The traditional subject areas have been hi-jacked to promote fashionable causes such as gender awareness, the environment and anti-racism, while teachers are expected to help to achieve the government's social goals instead of imparting a body of academic knowledge to their students.

The contributors to *The Corruption of the Curriculum* show that no major subject area has escaped the blight of political interference. Michele Ledda shows how issues of race and gender ('external criteria that have more to do with biology than literature') trump the love of language in the works of literature that students are given to study. The anthology of poetry produced by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) divides poetry into two groups: poetry from different cultures (16 poems) and a further 48 poems from British poets, of which 32 are post-1950:

'The whole tradition of English poetry from its origins to 1914 is represented by 16 poems while modern poetry has three times as many... A British pupil can go through the school system and get the top marks in English and English Literature without knowing that Spenser, Milton or Pope ever existed, but having studied Carol Ann Duffy twice, both at GCSE and A-level. With all due respect to Carol Ann Duffy, she is on the syllabus, not because she is a greater poet than Milton, but because she is more "relevant", dealing as she does with very contemporary issues such as disaffected learners.' (p.18)

## **Educational apartheid**

David Perks reveals, in his chapter 'What Is Science Education For?', that, whilst professing to want to encourage more pupils to study science, the DfES has introduced a new science curriculum that will probably have the opposite effect. The new approach, introduced last September, conflates the three disciplines of chemistry, physics and biology into 'scientific literacy', which has more to do with media studies than hard science. Students are asked to discuss issues such as global warming and GM crops, based on media coverage, and to consider whether or not scientists can be trusted:

'We don't need to flatter young people by asking them what they think about these issues. We do need to help them learn as much as they can about science, so that they can understand what science tells them about the natural world and their place in it... Asking teenagers to make up their minds about anything is pretty daunting. But if you try to ask them to decide if we need to replace the UK's nuclear power stations, you are far more likely to get the question: "Sir, what is nuclear power?"' (p.121)

Three independent reviews of the new science curriculum showed that students who have been exposed to it are less likely to trust scientists and less likely to want to continue science at A-level (pp.116-7). Independent schools are refusing to do the new science GCSEs since, as Dr Martin Stephen, High Master of St Paul's puts it, there is 'a terrifying absence of proper science', and are opting for the IGCSEs, which largely maintain the three separate disciplines, and which state schools cannot take. This is creating what David Perks calls 'a kind of educational apartheid' (p.126), under which pupils at state schools are less likely to proceed to science at A-level and undergraduate level.

Shirley Lawes identifies the same 'educational apartheid' in the teaching of languages. Two years ago the DfES decided that state schools need not teach foreign languages beyond Key Stage 3, with the result that, in over 70 per cent of state schools, languages are no longer compulsory after Year 9. The predictable result is that 30 per cent of all new young modern language undergraduates now come from independent schools (pp.87-8).

Part of the reason that so many young people decide to drop languages is that they are presented as a functional skill with the assumed practical purpose of getting a job. 'They reduce foreign language study to a functional skill that teaches the sort of thing you find in a "get-by" phrase book' (pp.92-3), whereas, taught properly:

'The study of foreign languages has the potential of ... providing a window on the world by enriching people's lives and opening them up to other cultures and literatures... learners of foreign languages move beyond their parochial, subjective experiences, to appreciate cultural achievements that have spread beyond national boundaries and are part of universal human culture.' (pp.93-4)

## **A fraction of the truth**

Simon Patterson shows how the teacher's timetable is now so minutely controlled by Whitehall that maths teachers are obliged to return to concepts such as fractions again and again in different years, without ever having the time to ensure that students can grasp them and move on:

'Too often the only residue which remained from their previous encounters with a topic was the memory of not having understood it last year, or the year before, or the year before that.' (p.102)

## **History without dates**

Chris McGovern describes the way in which history is now taught as the New History, that is to say, history without any sense of narrative or chronology, taught through a filter of politically correct perspectives (pp.83-5):

'Children jump around in time between, for example, Vikings and Victorians, Ancient Greeks and Tudors... There is no longer any requirement at all to teach about any specific personality from the past. Nor is there any requirement to teach about any specific event - other than within a world history context for one unit.' (pp.64 & 68)

One leading educational publisher produces a history book tailored to the requirements of the National Curriculum that mentions the Duke of Wellington in connection with Peterloo but not Waterloo (p.75). Unsurprisingly, those who have been subjected to the New History have only the haziest ideas about who did what in history. One survey found that half of young people questioned did not know that the Battle of Britain took place in World War II, and thought that either Gandalf, Horatio Hornblower or Christopher Columbus led the battle against the Spanish Armada (p.61). This ignorance of history has consequences for the stability of a multi-racial society:

'To know the history of one's country is a birthright. It tells us who we are and how we got here. It tells how our shared values came into being. A people that does not know its history is a people suffering from memory loss, amnesia- a damaging illness.' (p.61)

## **Geography and global citizenship**

Alex Standish describes how geography has become a vehicle for teaching global citizenship, with environmentalism as its central theme:

'... global citizenship education is tied to specific non-academic values that tend towards the replacement of knowledge with morality as the central focus of the curriculum. Thus global problems are not presented as issues to be interrogated for truth, knowledge and meaning, with a

view to students developing ideas about the potential courses of social and political action. Instead, the solution is to be found in the personal realm and is presented as a given: that people need to adhere to a new global values system that encourages them to consume less, have fewer children, take public transport rather than drive their cars, be less money-grabbing, support charities, and so forth. Such an approach is no substitute for educating pupils to interpret the world for themselves.'

Students are told to 'Think global, act local' - which misses out the national sphere of political action to solve problems. This misleads young people because 'there is no world government, nor global body for citizens to hold to account' (pp.47-8), and the only way in which children can be treated as political subjects in their own right is by 'redefining the meaning of politics from social change to a concern with identity' (p.48). However, by setting out to change the way in which children feel about things, in the interests of 'deep citizenship', teachers may be giving themselves a dangerously wide remit:

'If the personal consciousness of individuals is no longer a place of freedom in education, then they are no longer free moral beings.' (p.51)

In his introduction to the book Frank Furedi defines the corruption of the curriculum as: 'the erosion of the integrity of education through debasing and altering its meaning' (p.5). He describes how issues of pedagogy have been subordinated to social engineering and political expediency, as 'Britain's cultural elites prefer to turn every one of their concerns into a school subject' (p.4). Obesity, sex education, black history and gay history crowd the timetable. Alan Johnson thinks that by teaching environmentalism and persuading children of their impact on climate change we can 'quite literally save the world'.

'Literally save the world! That looks like a price worth paying for fiddling with the geography curriculum!... [However] Those who are genuinely interested in educating children and inspiring them to become responsible citizens will instead look to real subjects, which represent a genuine body of knowledge.' (pp.4-5)

Furedi believes that to confront the problems in education we need to (1) depoliticise education - 'Politicians need to be discouraged from regarding the curriculum as their platform for making statements'; (2) challenge the tendency to downsize the status of knowledge and expose the destructive consequences of 'anti-elitist education'; and (3) take seriously the ability of children to engage with knowledge and provide them with a challenging educational environment (p.10).

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'The Corruption of the Curriculum' by Frank Furedi, Shirley Lawes, Michele Ledda, Chris McGovern, Simon Patterson, David Perks and Alex Standish is published by Civitas, 77 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2EZ, tel 020 7799 6677, [www.civitas.org.uk](http://www.civitas.org.uk), price £12.00 inc.pp.

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