6 Beyond the Bell Curve: New Policies for the National Curriculum

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I want to argue that outmoded conceptions of the human mind and intelligence underpin too much of recent educational policy making. This problem is particularly acute in relation to schooling, but many of the assumptions spill over into attitudes towards higher and, especially, adult education. The problems created by these flawed perceptions influence decision making across the political spectrum. The political manifestos published by both the major parties, in probably the last election of the century, demonstrate an almost identical lack of awareness of what one of our leading educational thinkers, Jerome Bruner, has called ‘the cognitive revolution’ (Bruner 1996).

There is, however, a new government. And it was under the previous government, particularly in the period 1987 to 1997, that policy became increasingly directed away from any recognition of the significance of this new and more optimistic understanding of human potential. If the rhetoric of the new Labour commitment to opportunity and standards is to be realized, then no time can be lost in joining a debate that has been, de facto, taboo for more than a decade.

Let me begin by explaining what I estimate to be the central tenets of Bruner’s revolution. First there is the now widespread acceptance that the conception of intelligence that emerged in the early years of the twentieth century has only limited relevance to the organization of schooling, teaching and learning. Equally importantly, ideas about the measuring and testing of this intelligence have come to be seen as of very limited use. Secondly, there is the now sound body of knowledge that our capacity to learn is crucially determined by the opportunities we have to actively engage around any task; through verbalizing, practising and exploring in a socially interactive way. In saying that, I am suggesting much more than a pedagogic strategy. Theories about how our intelligence works reach into every corner of human activity, schooling more than most. Acceptance of new ideas about the extraordinary workings of the human mind require a change in the culture and organization
of schooling. Educational policy-makers too play a crucial role in this process.

I want first to explore these two developments in more detail, pointing out the relevance for policy. I then want to turn to the direction that policy could take if a stronger consensus around such ideas can be built. The story of schooling in the twentieth century, in fact from the origins of national school systems, has been dominated by social stratification. This is an oft-told tale, but the persistence of the process into the pores of classroom activity is less appreciated. We need to look at the story again to make the links with policy today.

In 1868 a Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Taunton, reported on the way secondary schooling might develop:

we shall call these the Third, the Second, and the First Graded education respectively... It is obvious that these distinctions correspond roughly, but by no means exactly, to the gradations of society.

First Grade: This class appears to have no wish to displace the classics from their present position in the forefront of English education.

Second Grade: though most of these parents would probably consent to give a higher place to Latin, they would only do so on condition that it did not exclude a very thorough knowledge of important modern subjects, and they would hardly give Greek any place at all.

Third Grade: belongs to a class distinctly lower in the scale... The need of this class is described briefly by Canon Moseley to be ‘very good reading, very good writing, very good arithmetic’ (Schools Inquiry Royal Commission, The Taunton Report, 1868, pp. 15–21).

A hundred years on, in 1938, the publication of the Spens Report established the template from which the Education Act would be drafted:

Intellectual development during childhood appears to progress as if it were governed by a single central factor, usually known as ‘general intelligence, which may be broadly described as innate all round ability’. It appears to enter into everything which the child attempts to think, or say, or do, and seems on the whole to be the most important factor in determining his work in the classroom. Our psychological witnesses assured us that it can be measured approximately by means of intelligence tests... The average child is said to attain the effective limit of development in general intelligence between the ages of 16 and 18... Since the ratio of each child’s mental age to his chronological