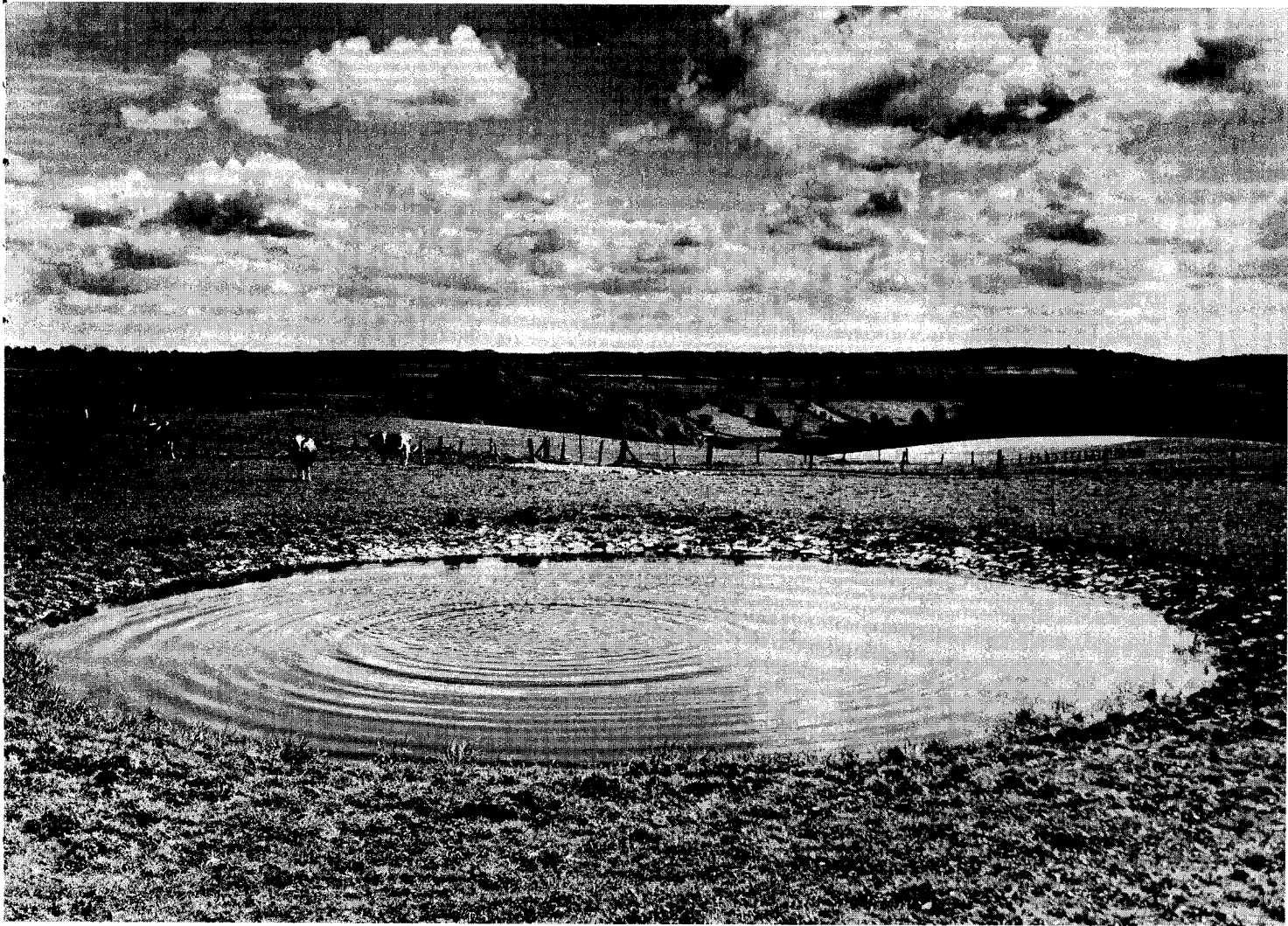


INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS-11 THE SCHOOLS COUNCIL I:
AN INTRODUCTION



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AN INTRODUCTION

44 Canfield Gardens,
London, N.W.6.
England.

21st January 1972.

Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535 Fifth Avenue,
New York, New York 10017
U S A

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The photograph which you find on the cover page is a reproduction of one which is the most prominent part of an exhibition in the display lobby of the Schools Council. This pastoral scene may be said to convey something of the spirit of the Schools Council, which is an interesting British institution designed to promote curriculum reform in primary and secondary education in England and Wales.

The pond in the photograph could be construed to be a pictorial metaphor for the original conception of the Schools Council: a source of change in a quiet pond, with innovation rippling out from the center. This was the original conception, but it is changing. And how appropriate this placid pastoral scene is for a curriculum development agency is an open question. Before we can address this question, we must first survey briefly the history of the Council and its consecration as a semi-autonomous marriage between local and national educational authorities.

I. HISTORY

The Schools Council evolved out of an informal group within the Ministry of Education, which was convened by David Eccles, Minister of State for Education, in 1962. This Curriculum Development Group, as it was called, was given the task of "forseeing changes before they became apparent on the ground."*

*Letter from the Permanent Secretary, Dame Mary Smieton, to local education authorities and teachers' association, which also described the Group as "a significant change in the organization of the Ministry." Quoted in an interview with Anthony Crosland in The Politics of Education, Maurice Kogan, editor, Penguin Press, London, 1971.

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The Curriculum Study Group was originally appointed in response to requests from the Nuffield Foundation, which had sponsored curriculum research projects in mathematics, for assistance in encouraging schools to use the Nuffield materials. The rationale for the Curriculum Study Group was to provide a connection between curriculum research and the schools.

But after the Group was convened, it started suggesting curriculum development projects itself. And thereby raised the spectre of national governmental interference in what had been considered to be both the heart of the education process and the sole domain of the local professionals in the schools. There was a massive outcry over this development from every conceivable interest group -- teachers, local education officers, headmasters, etc. How dare the national government interfere with the professional's prerogative of judgment about what and how to teach?!

By 1963 there was a new minister, Sir Edward Boyle, who, in response to the complaints of the professionals, appointed a study group under Sir John Lockwood to make recommendations about how curriculum development should be encouraged in England and Wales, given the traditional division of responsibility among the national government, local education authorities and the schools. This committee reported in 1964, and by October of that year the Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations had come into being, under the Chairmanship of Sir John Maud, an Oxford College Master. Alan Bullock, Master of St. Catherine's College, Oxford, shortly thereafter became Chairman. And the present Chairman is Dame Muriel Stewart.

II. ORGANIZATION

The organization of the Schools Council reflects the tensions of its origins. Its structure is one of the most complicated ever devised by man. The Governing Council has seventy-five members, representing every possible interest group in British education, as well as ten co-opted members, often including educators too.

A committee structure organizes the policy-making process; and these committees include many more teachers as well.

It was self-consciously decided to require that an overwhelming majority of the governing body be practicing teachers. The emphasis on teachers, as well as the system of checks and balances built into the guaranteed representation of the various interests groups, is a direct result of the uproar caused by the threat of national domination through the Curriculum Development Group.

The Schools Council was originally financed by the Department of Education and Science. However, after a couple of years a scheme was devised whereby the national government would contribute fifty per cent. of the funds to the Schools Council, and the other fifty per cent. would be allocated by all of the local educational authorities in England and Wales according to an enrollment formula. So presently there is an equal financial stake between national and local authorities in the £1.5 million annual budget.

The committee structure of the Council is built around subject groups and school age divisions. All of these working committees report to the Program Committee, which makes final policy judgments about research to be funded. (See Appendix I)

The staff of the Schools Council includes approximately fifty professional personnel, most of whom are seconded to the Council by various educational agencies for limited periods of time. At any one time there are three Joint Secretaries, who oversee the administrative operations: one Joint Secretary from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools, one from the Civil Service, one from local educational authorities. A similar pattern of secondment is reproduced throughout the professional ranks of the Council. The staff operates as program officers at a philanthropic foundation. However, it appears to me that they have much less authority than their counterparts at philanthropic foundations, because of the political restraints imposed by the unwieldy committee system. The officers do not do curriculum research themselves.

III. THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The actual curriculum development is done by research and development teams which contract with the Schools Council. There is no single paradigm of a curriculum development project by one of these teams. Presently there are seventy-three projects underway. There does appear to be a greater emphasis on the development of curriculum materials than on pure (or theoretical) research; although there are some teams devoted to the latter. Some of these projects have been in progress since the Council was founded; others have just begun.

Approximately £775,000 was allocated to research teams during the current fiscal year; the grants ranged from £1000 to over £100,000. The subjects ranged from "Music for Young Children" to "Nuffield A-level Physics" (senior level secondary physics for advanced students), from "Moral Education" to a review of the secondary examination system.

Most curriculum projects are run by university or college of education lecturers, with the assistance of practicing teachers.

And although there is full-time staff running most projects, there is significant involvement of classroom teachers in the testing of curriculum materials. Indeed, Schools Council staff members have estimated that from 30,000 to 40,000 teachers (out of a teaching population of approximately 300,000 in England and Wales) are presently participating in one of the seventy-three projects. Even though the degree of actual teacher participation varies, the fact of any participation at all by such large numbers indicates the importance of the work of the Schools Council in the life of the schools. The quantity of impact in and of the process of research is greater than in any similar operation in the United States.

The quality and quantity of the actual curriculum development once it is completed and its impact in the average classroom are not so clear.

Some projects are designed to provide books and visual aid materials to the teacher. Often these are written by the staff of the project and then tested in the schools. Other projects have grander aims: to change the actual teaching methods of the teachers. The Humanities Curriculum Project is an example of the latter approach. This project attempted to devise a new relationship between teacher and student in the discussion of important social issues: the teacher is supposed to be the neutral chairman of the discussion. The more grandiose the aim of the project, the more doubt there is about its impact. In a later newsletter I hope to analyze in detail the Humanities project: its research process and curriculum results.

A different approach to the research process has been taken by a new mathematics project, The "Mathematics for the Majority Curriculum Project". The team has invited teams of teachers to write the curriculum material from scratch; fifty one such teams are now part of the project. This project is involving the teacher in the classroom from the very beginning.

The actual control over the research teams exercised by the staff of the Schools Council is quite loose. One program officer told me that he visited a team in his jurisdiction and found its progress quite unsatisfactory. But there was little he could do about it.

On the other hand, there has been a recent dispute between the Humanities Curriculum Project and the committees of the Schools Council which must approve certain "products" before they are published. The project team offered a set of curriculum materials concerning race relations: they were quite argumentative, and the various committees found them controversial. The team invited outside assessors to read these materials, who, in the course of a meeting with the Program Committee, raised doubts about the

advisability of placing such controversial materials in the hands of teachers. So the materials were sent back to the Humanities staff for revision.

The only conclusion which one can draw from these two cases is that in the early research days of the project there is very little oversight and control. Whereas at the end there is often strict (some would say arbitrary) control by the interest groups represented on the various committees of the Council. However, it should be said that very few claims of censorship have been raised; indeed the one example of the Humanities project seems to stand by itself, and it is a very complicated project and is not subject to simple reactions.

In addition to its curriculum development activities, the Schools Council evaluates the policies of the various examination boards which provide the external testing services for the schools of England and Wales. The Council is about to embark on a major study of the examination system at the secondary school level: the results of this study could have a major impact on the whole educational system.

The major role of the Schools Council is in the selection of projects for research. Presently, because of financial constraints, there is a queue of approved projects waiting for financing. The only pattern which emerges from the choices of the Council is the diversity and variety of selections. (See Appendix II) There appears to be very little thought given to overall priorities to guide the mix of projects. This is not to say there have been no decisions taken about priorities. From time to time the Program Committee has emphasized problem areas such as preparing for the raising of the school leaving age and also dealing with discrimination. And some staff members think that all of the Program Committee's decisions reflect an implicit set of priorities, although this position is vigorously disputed. But the selection seems to be mainly responses to requests from research entrepreneurs.

There can be no doubt that this ad hoc process has provided the teachers in British classrooms with many new and exciting tools to use. The issue now becomes whether or not they are using them.

IV. THE DISSEMINATION PROCESS

Questions about strategies for getting the new curriculum materials into the classroom seem to have been neglected in projects in the past. Yet most of the responsibility for dealing with this problem has been left to the research teams.

Today officials at the Schools Council are quite sensitive to the importance and difficulty of devising tactics for getting information about the projects into the schools. They and the teachers in the field identify this problem as the most important facing the Council.

The institutional arrangement which seems to facilitate this process is the field staff of the Schools Council. However, there are only eleven members of the field staff to serve the 33,000 schools and 377,000 teachers in England and Wales. So at best these field officers can only provide other distribution networks with information.

The traditional networks for communication include: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools, who have a national constituency, local authority advisors, colleges of education, the BBC and other broadcasters, the various educational organizations involved in Schools Council activities, headmasters, and teachers themselves. The Council deals with each of these networks with varying degrees of regularity but mainly in an informal manner.

The newest agencies for distribution of Schools Council curriculum materials are the teachers' centers. However, it is incorrect to characterize these centers as "agencies" of the Schools Council, because they are quite independent of it. Yet the Schools Council has been the evangelical force behind the establishment of most of them. The relationship between teachers' centers and the Schools Council is quite complex. And because of the importance which officials of the Council attach to the Teachers' Centers as part of the overall strategy for curriculum reform, I shall devote the next newsletter to an analysis of them and their role in the reform of education in Great Britain (See IJS-12). For the moment suffice it to note that they represent the crucial link in the system for disseminating Schools Council information and research results.

The actual distribution of curriculum materials is done through commercial publishing houses. This policy has put a comprehensive distribution system at the service of the Council, but the strategy has also entailed relatively high prices for some Schools Council materials. Teachers and administrators in the field say that the price of Schools Council material is one of the major impediments to its use in the classroom.

In addition to the problem of communicating information about Schools Council projects and distributing curriculum materials, there is the problem of providing training for teachers in the use of the material. Again, the teachers' centers are expected to play a role. Also, some research teams have provided teacher training

workshops as part of their last year of work. Nevertheless, there has been no attempt to provide on-going teacher training through the Schools Council, although there is cooperation between the Council and training agencies such as the Inspectorate and the colleges of education. Indeed teacher training is constitutionally excluded from Schools Council activities.

Constraints of funds, philosophy, and national character have conspired to create a restrained attitude among those in the Schools Council to the problem of getting the results of their labors into Britain's classrooms. The investment in research and the maintenance of the cumbersome policy committees has meant that there are severe limits on the amount of money available to be spent on the distribution and information aspects of Council activities. The philosophy of the Council -- that the teacher is a professional who ought to choose his method and his tools for himself -- has been construed to mean that the Council and its teams ought to tread lightly in putting out the word on their activities. And finally, and least supportable by fact but justifiable by my general impressions, the Council officers share with their fellow Englishmen an aversion to "selling" their materials and methods to their teaching constituency: it would be too American. Until recently all three elements have resulted not only in a system of presentation of questionable effectiveness, but also in a disregard for the problem itself. Now the problem is recognized and solutions are being sought.

It is quite clear from talking to teachers and wardens of teachers' centers that the Schools Council staff's perception of communications as its most pressing problem is quite correct. Dealing with this problem will increase the effectiveness of the Schools Council more than any other possible policy action.

The challenge will be to deal with the problem of dissemination without subverting the guiding principles which have illuminated the approach of the Schools Council during the past seven years. And it is to these principles that we should turn before making any tentative judgments about the Schools Council.

V. THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SCHOOLS COUNCIL

The foundation principle of the Schools Council is that the teacher is a professional. Therefore, it is the Council's role to provide him with new tools with which to pursue his profession. A corollary of this principle is that the Council should be responsive to the wishes of the teacher and should never "tell" the teacher what to do.

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The second principle is that the reform of the curriculum is an on-going process, which must involve the teacher at all times. This principle is of somewhat more recent vintage than that the teacher is a professional, although it is quite consistent with it. An important implication of this second principle is that, unlike the picture on the cover of this newsletter, the process of curriculum reform will not be that of a central source rippling out innovation to those in the rest of the system, but instead it is a decentralized process whereby small groups of professionals can and do create their own ripples. And the role of the Schools Council becomes one of providing materials for those involved in their own curriculum development projects and undertaking development projects which are clearly beyond local resources.

Now, in order to be consistent with the second principle, the research teams are beginning to see themselves as initiators of an on-going process. One new team is planning to publish a continuing magazine.

The principles of curriculum development contrast dramatically with the theories which can be inferred from the historical pattern in the United States. In primary and secondary schools and university colleges of education, the emphasis has been on the creation of teacher-proof curriculum materials, which can be fed directly into the students' hands and used by even the least adroit teacher. This attitude may account for some of the lack of success of nation-wide curriculum reform, although it does not provide a sufficient explanation.

The attractiveness of the Schools Council philosophy is that it treats the teachers with respect and expects the teachers to be able to adapt curriculum materials to the particular problems of specific students. Also, it encourages those who develop curriculum materials for the Council to involve the professionals themselves in the process and to create materials which are flexible enough to be used in many situations. And on both counts, the Council has been relatively successful.

Although the teacher as professional and curriculum development as a process are the ideals, and there may be exceptions to them in Schools Council activities, the existence of the ideals has created a style of curriculum development in Great Britain which is attractive on both general social and educational grounds.

The participatory character of curriculum development is the method most consistent with an open and democratic society which values the contributions of individuals to their own lives.

And one can justify this approach on educational grounds if one understands the educational process to be such that one ought to consider the expressed interests of those participating in it as well as what is thought to be in their interest. Also, the lessons of modern developmental psychology teach us that the curriculum must be tailored to the needs of specific students at particular times in their lives. And philosophy of science indicates that there are many ways to order and reorder knowledge in particular fields. All of which suggests that curriculum design must be considered an on-going process which tailors specific teaching strategies to particular educational problems.

VI. THE MISUSE OF THE SCHOOLS COUNCIL PHILOSOPHY

The major drawback to the approach of the Schools Council to the problems of curriculum reform is that it has let its two guiding principles be used to prevent it from most effectively communicating the results of its work and thereby involving the community in its activities. However, one must also see that this hesitation is as much the result of history as principle: the reaction of teachers and teachers' groups to the supposed meddling of the Curriculum Study Group. But the principles have themselves supported the politically influenced hesitation.

We must be quite clear that there is no logical relationship between the principles of teacher professionalism and curriculum process and a restrained program of communicating research results. Vigorous communication about Schools Council activities and the distribution of curriculum materials would enhance the professional expertise of the teacher and probably involve him in the curriculum development process in a greater degree. And my own conversations with teachers and administrators indicate that a more active Schools Council communication and dissemination program is exactly what they want.

A second problem, which may be related to the principle of curriculum development as an on-going process, is the lack of clear planning of particular projects in terms of results as well as the proposed results of the sum total of projects. Although the emphasis on process does require a certain ambiguity of goals, the actual research and development programs would be helped by more clarity of planning at the outset in regard to particular results -- even process results -- expected, so that one could make some sort of judgment about the success or lack of it at the end of the project. One need not ask for a systems analysis world of flow charts or a system of inputs and outputs; only some clarification of what can be expected of the project as it progresses through various stages of development. Once again, let it be quite clear that one need not subvert the Schools

Council principles of curriculum development or the British style of reform in order to deal with the problem of clarity of project planning.

Perhaps the most important contribution which the Schools Council can make to education in Britain and as a model for other countries is through the systematic pursuit of curriculum reform in a manner consistent with its guiding principles. Yet the lessons of past projects is that when these principles are too strictly construed they impede the effectiveness of the very reforms which are the goals of the projects.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the Schools Council provide the American observer with a very helpful institutional model for organizing curriculum development and applied educational research. Both its good points and its bad have lessons to teach those who will be implementing the National Institute of Education which will hopefully emerge from this Congress.

However, it is quite important for the foreign observer to understand the limitations on the Schools Council: it can provide curriculum materials and reform teaching in particular subject areas; however, it can never be the source of major reforms of the British educational system. The very characteristic which makes it most effective within the political universe of British education -- its involvement of every possible interest group -- means that it will never be the font of major structural reforms which threaten many of the very interests which control its destiny. And constitutionally the Schools Council has no brief for such systemic reform.

The existence of a major curriculum research and development organization will help improve the system as it is, but major educational as well as social problems can only be dealt with in the larger political process. For example, the Schools Council will never be able to deal with what I consider to be Britain's most pressing social-educational problem: the way in which a selective school system makes parental income the most important determinant of quality education and thereby reinforces class segregation and subverts the overall quality of education for all classes. Nor will a National Institute of Education in the United States be able by itself to deal with the problems of racial segregation in the schools.

The role which an institution such as the Schools Council can play is in providing techniques and substantive materials for implementing general social decisions once they are reached through the political

process. Its present value is in improving the system as it is; its future value will be in helping to implement the system as it ought to be.

More on the Schools Council as it is and ought to be in the next newsletter, where I focus on teachers' centers as agencies for change within the British educational system.

Sincerely,



Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

Information contained in this newsletter was gleaned from the following documentary and interview sources:

Documentary

Schools Council Reports, 1965-71.

An Internal Schools Council Working Paper On Research Projects.

The Politics of Education, Maurice Kogan, ed., Penguin Press,
London 1971.

Interviews

Geoffrey Caston, former Joint Secretary of the Schools Council, now Assistant Secretary at the University Grants Committee, and shortly to be the new Registrar of Oxford University.

Geoffrey Cooksey, Joint Secretary of the Schools Council, seconded from a headmastership of a comprehensive school, soon to be headmaster of a new school system in Milton Keynes, a new town.

Gordon Hamflett, chief field officer of the Schools Council, seconded from Her Majesty's Inspectorate.

Ian Parry, Program officer at the Schools Council, seconded from the Advisory Service of the Devon Educational Authority.

Robert Sibson, Joint Secretary of the Schools Council, seconded from Her Majesty's Inspectorate.

Innumerable Wardens of teachers' centers and teachers themselves.

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