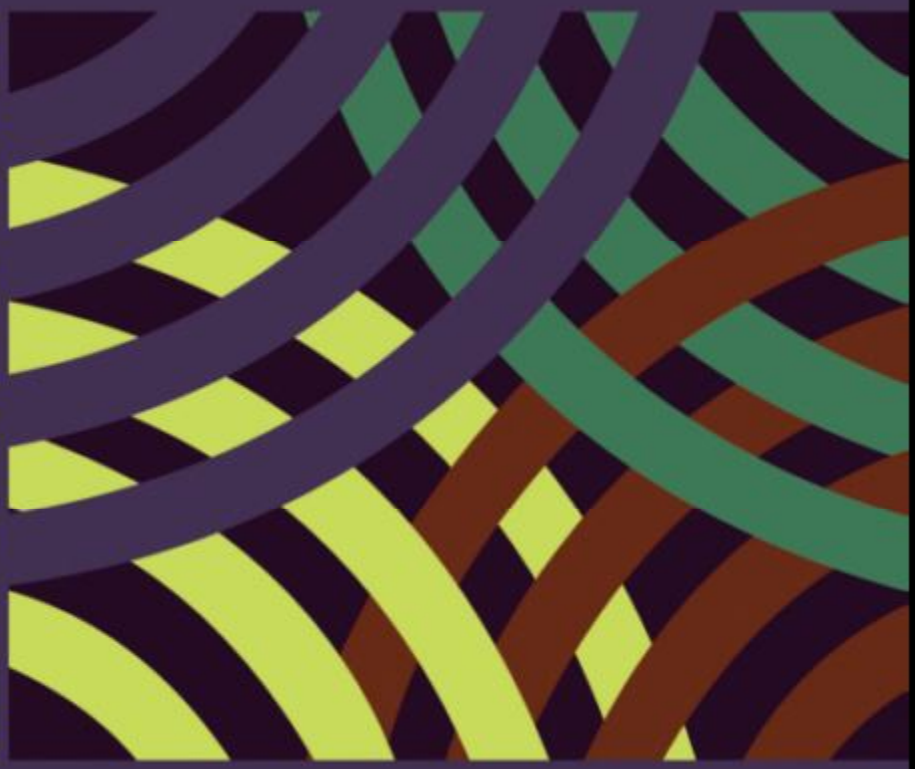
Beyond the National Curriculum

Curricular Centralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe and the USA



David Coulby

Beyond the National Curriculum

Against a background of political, economic and social changes in Europe and the USA, **David Coulby** explores the place of knowledge within society. Coulby looks at the widespread growth of national self-consciousness and the trend towards an increased heterogeneity of society. He argues that this has led to a shift towards curricular centralism and an eagerness for states to specify an homogenous knowledge for their populations.

Beyond the National Curriculum focuses on what is taught in schools and universities in Europe and the USA. It considers the role of school and university education in producing prejudice against marginalized groups and citizens of other nations. It also evaluates the role that school and university knowledge plays in the generation of conflict within and between states. This provocative book offers a radical assessment of the role of school and university education, questioning the accepted links between state and knowledge.

David Coulby has taught in primary, secondary and special schools. He is currently Professor of Education at Bath Spa University College. He has published on a wide range of educational issues, with a particular focus on intercultural curriculum questions.

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Beyond the National Curriculum: Curricular Centralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe and the USA
David Coulby Faculty of Education and Human Sciences, Bath Spa University College

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Curricular Centralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe and the USA

David Coulby

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Series Editors' Preface

It has become a feature of our times that an initial qualification is no longer seen to be adequate for life-long work within a profession and programmes of professional development are needed. Nowhere is the need more clear than with respect to education, where changes in the national schooling and assessment system, combined with changes in the social and economic context, have transformed our professional lives.

The series, Master Classes in Education, is intended to address the needs of professional development, essentially at the level of taught masters degrees. Although aimed primarily at teachers and lecturers, it is envisaged that the books will appeal to a wider readership, including those involved in professional educational management, health promotion and youth work. For some, the texts will serve to update their knowledge. For others, they may facilitate career reorientation by introducing, in an accessible form, new areas of expertise or knowledge.

The books are overtly pedagogical, providing a clear track through the topic by means of which it is possible to gain a sound grasp of the whole field. Each book familiarizes the reader with the vocabulary and the terms of discussion, and provides a concise overview of recent research and current debates in the area. While it is obviously not possible to deal with every aspect in depth, a professional who has read the book should feel confident that they have covered the major areas of content, and discussed the different issues at stake. The books are also intended to convey a sense of the future direction of the subject and its points of growth or change.

In each subject area the reader is introduced to different perspectives and to a variety of readings of the subject under consideration. Some of the readings may conflict, others may be compatible but distant. Different perspectives may well give rise to different lexicons and different bibliographies, and the reader is always alerted to these differences. The variety of frameworks within which each topic can be construed is then a further source of reflective analysis.

The authors in this series have been carefully selected. Each person is an experienced professional, who has worked in that area of education as a practitioner and also addressed

the subject as a researcher and theoretician. Drawing upon both pragmatic and theoretical aspects of their experience, they are able to take a reflective view while preserving a sense of what occurs, and what is possible, at the level of practice.

Beyond the National Curriculum: Curriculum Centralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe and the USA

What is it to 'know' something? To what extent is what we know we 'know' bound in with what we believe we are, in terms of our ethnic, national, religious and cultural identity? As teachers and as educators, such questions probe the very heart of what we are about. They allude to the often invisible relationship between what and how we teach and the development of the economy, the state, and both national and global peace. However, within the classrooms in the colleges and schools around the country, such issues are only rarely, if ever, discussed or aired. Most of the time, we remain content to assume that we teach what we know and children learn what we teach, and that questions of politically controlled knowledge within highly diverse populations are not part of the business of education, still less of actual teachers.

An incident reported by a student teacher on teaching practice in a local primary school makes the point. A new entry to the reception class was taking part in a class science lesson. The four-year-old listened as the teacher talked about how some animals no longer existed in the world today. With the aid of pictures, she described the Dodo, what it looked like and where it used to live. 'Has anyone got any idea why the Dodo became extinct?' she asked. The new boy put up his hand. 'Because only one Dodo got into the ark.', he explained. 'No,' replied the teacher gently. 'Has anyone else got any ideas why the Dodo became extinct?' The student teacher commented that what the new child had thought of as 'knowledge' turned out, in the setting of the school, not to count as 'knowledge' at all but as myth. In a more adult but similar example, one still recalls the surprise when, on a college trip to the Bayeux tapestry in Normandy, we realized for the first time that the invasion of England by the wicked Normans could fairly be viewed as a justified insistence that a promise be kept. The English view of the Norman invasion was revealed to us as just that: an 'English view', *part* of our heritage, and simultaneously *partial*.

In this book, Professor Coulby provides us not so much with a series of answers, as a set of complex and pertinent connections. His subject matter, as he explains in his introduction, is the place of knowledge within the changing network of nations and states, of economic dependencies and controls, and of peaceful and warring tendencies. The transitions currently taking place in Europe, markedly different in east and west, are carefully described in order to allow him to develop an analysis of the relations between educational curricula and the bases

of traditional, cultural and religious knowledge. He explains how knowledge has emerged as 'a major trading commodity in the international market' and the effects of this upon production and consumption within these 'knowledge-based' economies. At the same time, he traces the growth of postmodernism, which is described as a critical stance, 'a way of regarding the world and oneself". This increasing and demonstrable distrust of absolute knowledge, of the very possibility of a definitive account or 'voice', echoes the profound economic and political changes taking place post-Thatcher and Regan, in the developed world.

One of us remembers David Coulby lecturing on sociology at the University of North London in the mid 1980s. His students spoke of his contentious statements and of the ways in which he would challenge matters which had previously seemed almost self-evident to them. At the start of this book, he warns the reader that his teaching style is best characterized as 'pedagogy of provocation'. He sets out to help us re-think and re-formulate our ideas about the political control of knowledge, and the ways in which this politically controlled knowledge is in contrast to, or in conflict with, the diversity of the populations to whom it is delivered as institutionalized curricula. In the course of this endeavour, we traverse topics as varied, and as important, as the relation between knowledge and warfare, religious belief, special education needs and identity.

This book provokes and engages, it disturbs and excites. We are not left with the illusions we started with, and neither are we allowed to remain intellectually lazy or politically uninformed. It deals with the very '*raison d'etre*' for education, the distribution and dissemination of knowledge and the enculturation of the children in and of our societies. David Coulby tells us that 'if this text is successful, it will provoke both assent and disagreement'. In the eyes of the editors, it does just that.

Ruth Merttens and John Head
November 1999

Acknowledgements

Although I have been involved in several writing projects, this is the first book that I have written on my own. It seems an appropriate place to acknowledge the various contributions without which it could not have been completed.

Thanks to Ruth Merttens for remembering our conversations and for commissioning this book on behalf of Falmer. Thanks to her too, and to Robert Cowen and Crispin Jones, for commenting on an earlier draft. The sins of omission and commission remain my own.

Many students and lecturers at Bath Spa University College and at the London University Institute of Education have discussed with me the matters central to this book and have helped me develop my understanding. Furthermore, I would wish to add the names of Leslie Bash and Jagdish Gundara to those of Robert Cowen and Crispin Jones as the people who have helped me to understand aspects of society and education.

More than most writers on education I am indebted to academics in foreign parts for doing their best to correct my misunderstandings of their societies, cultures and education systems. Friends and colleagues in the AENEAS network established under SOCRATES and in the various TEMPUS projects in which I have participated have been particularly helpful in this respect. Hospitality and discussions in Madison, Rotterdam, Joensuu, Daugavpils, Oradea, Sibiu, Rethymnon, Athens, Ioannina, Hildesheim, Berlin, Gent, Copenhagen and Sophia are warmly acknowledged.

As well as the people mentioned above, the development of the ideas in this book is particularly due to discussions, often over many years, with Bill Lee, Mike Berger, Nigel Prior, Tony Welsh, Andreas Kazamias, John Raynor, George Flouris, Evie Zambeta and Phil Garner.

I am grateful to Bath Spa University College for establishing a climate in which research and scholarship are encouraged, and to my colleagues in the Faculty of Education and Human Sciences for their support and enthusiasm. In particular I

would like to thank Christine Eden, Heather Williamson and Stephen Ward for their unflinching personal, professional and intellectual support across thirteen years.

Thanks to Jacquie, Emma and Will for supporting this project and for sharing the sometimes esoteric interests on which it is based.

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, Emma Coulby, and to my father, Derek, who considered my interest in the link between education and warfare worthy of further investigation.

David Coulby

Introductory Remarks

People tend to assume that what they are taught in schools and universities is true, worthwhile and useful. Having completed their education they will retain the impression that what they learned is what everyone learns and should learn. Few, even among those who work in education, will question the content of schooling and higher education. For example, people will debate and research the most effective ways to teach science, but pay less attention to what science should be taught. They almost totally fail to address the question of whether science should be taught at all. The curricula of schools and universities are taken for granted.

In Europe and the USA the content of the school curriculum is increasingly subject to political, often central, control. There is also a tendency towards greater curricular uniformity, both within countries and between them. Higher education is also part of this trend. Many countries or, in the case of federations like Germany or the USA, states, are developing national curricular systems. In the case of England and Wales this is known as The National Curriculum. This book explores what lies outside the National Curriculum, what has been expelled from it, in cultural and epistemological terms. By focusing on Europe and the USA instead of simply England and Wales it also provides an insight into what lies beyond the National Curriculum in international terms.

The book questions the appropriateness of the shift towards curricular centralism. Furthermore, it questions the appropriateness of the resulting curricula for the societies that they are presumably designed to serve. It does this principally by pointing to the heterogeneous populations of Europe and the USA. The many different cultures of Europe represent different knowledge and value systems that in many cases are radically different from, or even oppositional to, those embodied in national curricula. For people in such groups the content of school and university knowledge is less easily taken for granted since it represents a threat to their culture, even to their very survival as a group.

The book considers the various ways in which curricular systems have deviated from their apparent purpose. It concentrates on those individuals and groups who are victims of state knowledge: those who are disadvantaged by state knowledge and those who are ignored or denigrated by it. It focuses on the distorted identities produced and reproduced, for the privileged as well as the disadvantaged, by deviant knowledge systems.

Curricular systems are also seen to be deviant at a system level. The link between knowledge production and material production is explored against the emergence of a knowledge economy. The state's monopoly of the means of violence and its monopoly over knowledge production and reproduction is explored against the continuity of warfare in Europe. The dissonance between curricula and societies is seen in its most extreme form in those states where schools and universities actually teach hatred of the inhabitants of other states or of non-dominant groups.

Commensurate with its concentration on diversity, the book adopts an international perspective. It attempts to escape the national and nationalist confines of state curricular systems. The exemplification is drawn from across Europe and the United States. By providing an insight into a diversity of knowledge systems it provides some contextualisation of those most familiar to readers. Recognizing that school and university knowledge change when state boundaries are crossed is a further technique in bringing them into closer scrutiny. An international perspective can assist in reversing the process of taking school and university knowledge for granted.

Analysing education from a variety of perspectives, the book develops a cumulative presentation of curricular systems radically at variance with the societies and economies within which they operate. The victims of this variance are many. Among the casualties of centralization is school and university knowledge itself, displaced in too many cases by its opposite, the institutionalization of lies, trivia, ignorance and prejudice.