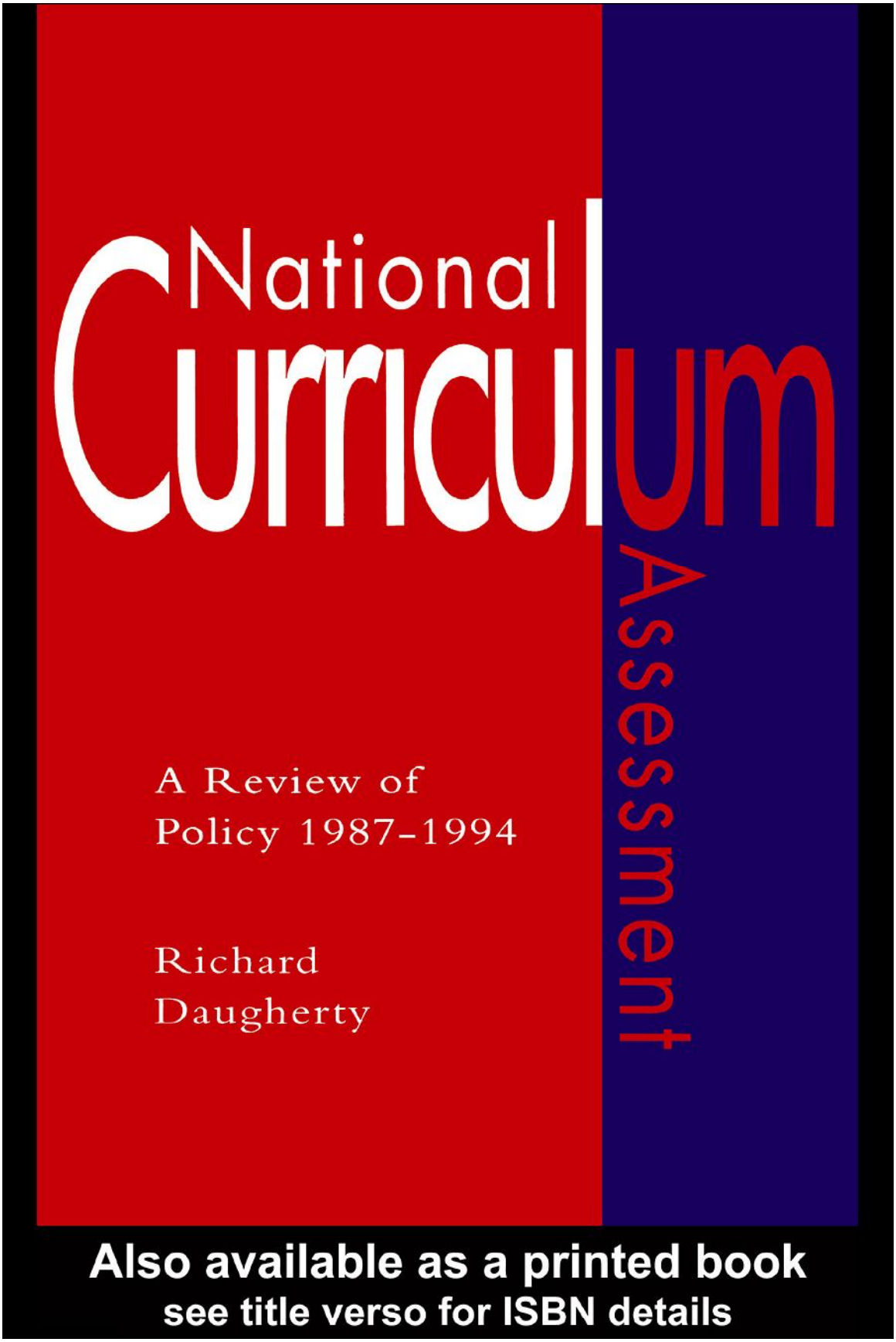
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Contents

Abbreviations

ACAC	Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (from April 1994)
AMMA	Assistant Masters and Mistresses Association (to December 1992)
APU	Assessment of Performance Unit
ASE	Association for Science Education
AT	attainment target
ATL	Association of Teachers and Lecturers (from January 1993)
ATM	Association of Teachers of Mathematics
CCW	Curriculum Council for Wales (to March 1994)
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DES	Department of Education and Science (to April 1992)
DFE	Department for Education (from April 1992)
ERA	Education Reform Act 1988
GCE	General Certificate of Education (at Ordinary and Advanced levels)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GSA	Girls' Schools Association
KS (1 etc.)	Key Stage (1 to 4)
LEA	local education authority
NAHT	National Association of Headteachers
NAS/UWT	National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers
NATE	National Association for the Teaching of English
NCC	National Curriculum Council (England) (to September 1993)
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NFER/BGC	National Foundation for Educational Research/Bishop Grosseteste College (a test development agency)

NRA	National Record of Achievement
NUT	National Union of Teachers
PC	profile component
PoS	programme of study
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
RANSC	Records of Achievement National Steering Committee
RoA	record of achievement
SAT	standard assessment task
SCAA	School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (England) (from October 1993)
SEAC	School Examinations and Assessment Council (England and Wales) (to September 1993)
SoA	statement of attainment
TA	teacher assessment
TES	*The Times Educational Supplement*
TGAT	Task Group on Assessment and Testing
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (a test development agency)
WO	Welsh Office
Y (1 etc.)	school years (1 to 13)

Glossary of terms

Assessment arrangements: Arrangements, made through regulations issued by the Secretaries of State (for Education and for Wales), for assessing pupils' attainment in each National Curriculum subject.

Attainment target: A term used in the Education Reform Act to refer to the 'knowledge, skills and understanding which pupils of different abilities and maturities are expected to have by the end of each Key Stage'. In practice it has come to be used to refer to the sub-sets of attainment identified within most National Curriculum subjects (some have a single attainment target). Attainment targets are defined in most subjects in terms of statements of attainment grouped at each of ten levels, i.e. *not* separately defined for each Key Stage.

Core subjects: Certain of the foundation subjects named in the Education Reform Act to which particular emphasis has been given in curriculum planning and assessment arrangements, viz. mathematics, science, English and, for Welsh-speaking schools in Wales, Welsh.

End of Key Stage statements: Statements defined in the National Curriculum Orders in art, music and physical education which describe the knowledge, skills and understanding pupils are expected to achieve at the end of a Key Stage.

Foundation subjects: The subjects of the National Curriculum as set out in the Education Reform Act: mathematics, science, English, Welsh (in Wales only), technology, history, geography, a modern foreign language (Key Stages 3 and 4 only), art, music, physical education.

Key Stages: The periods in each pupil's schooling to which the National Curriculum requirements apply. There are four Key Stages, related to the ages of the majority of pupils in a teaching group: from the beginning of compulsory education to the age of 7, from 7 to 11, from 11 to 14, from 14 to the end of compulsory education.

Level descriptors: Broad descriptions of the attainments expected at each level of attainment in each attainment target, replacing the more specific statements of attainment. To be introduced from 1995, in line with the recommendations of the 1993/94 National Curriculum Review, 'to create a more integrated description of what a pupil must know, understand and be able to do' (Dearing Final Report, para. 7.29).

Levels of attainment: The ten different sets of statements of attainment, from level 1 (lowest) to level 10 (highest) defined within each attainment target of each National Curriculum subject except art, music and physical education. Developed from a model of attainment originated by the Task Group on Assessment and Testing.

Orders: The legal documents ('Statutory Instruments') which put into effect decisions of the Secretaries of State using powers given to them by Act of Parliament. In the context of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the term usually refers to the detailed specifications of attainment targets and programmes of study in each National Curriculum subject, for example, 'the English Order'.

Profile component: A term introduced by the Task Group on Assessment and Testing to refer to a small number of sub-sets of attainment within each subject which would be used for reporting a pupil's 'profile' of attainment. In practice the term 'attainment target' came to be used to describe sub-sets of attainment and, in certain subjects only, 'profile component' came to refer to a group of attainment targets in a subject, for example, 'Writing' in English, comprising the three attainment targets of Writing, Spelling and Handwriting.

Programme of study: A term used in the Education Reform Act to refer to the 'matters, skills and processes which are required to be taught to pupils of different abilities and maturities during each Key Stage'. The National Curriculum Orders for each subject set out the programmes of study for that subject alongside the attainment targets.

Standard assessment task: A term introduced by the Task Group on Assessment and Testing to refer to the many possible types of standard, externally devised, test materials which could be used in National Curriculum assessment arrangements; included optional, within-Key-Stage 'SATs' as well as statutory, end-of-Key-Stage SATs. The term has fallen out of official use partly because of ministerial dislike of educational jargon and partly because the agency responsible for Scholastic Aptitude Tests in the USA threatened legal action over the copyright of the acronym 'SAT'.

Statements of attainment: The specific attainment descriptors set out at each of ten levels in each attainment target in all National Curriculum subjects except art, music and physical education. Scheduled to be replaced by more general 'level descriptors' following the 1993/94 National Curriculum Review.

Teacher assessment: Assessments of the attainments defined in the National Curriculum Orders which are undertaken by teachers during a Key Stage as part of their normal teaching. From 1994 those teacher judgments of pupil attainment will be reported to parents alongside the pupil's test results.

Tests: Externally devised, end-of-Key-Stage assessment instruments administered and marked by teachers (though external marking of some tests is proposed from 1995).

Preface

The writing of this book has its origins in 1988. That was the year in which the most substantial piece of education legislation since 1944, bringing in radical changes affecting the education system of England and Wales, completed its passage through Parliament. It was also the year in which I found myself not only an academic lecturing and researching in the field of educational assessment, but also a bit-part player in the large supporting cast of people helping to implement a central provision of that Act, the National Curriculum with its associated assessment arrangements. I was appointed a member of one of two newly-established curriculum councils and was later to chair that body (the Curriculum Council for Wales), but it was natural that my interest should turn to policies for national assessments of pupil attainment.

For the first three years of its existence I was also a member of the third Government education quango created by the Act, the School Examinations and Assessment Council (with a remit covering both England and Wales). I must therefore take a share of the responsibility for the advice SEAC Council offered to ministers and for the actions it took. However, without disclaiming such responsibility, I have attempted to stand back from that involvement and offer an account which is not dependent on 'inside knowledge' or spiced with anecdotes and overemphasis on the personalities of the main actors in the story which has unfolded since 1988. Some of those characters have undoubtedly left their mark on the system but it is the policies themselves and the policy-making process which are at the centre of this version of events. Indeed I have made a point of drawing only on documents which are in the public domain when reporting the positions taken by influential individuals and groups.

The documents I have made use of are of three types. The major policy papers, such as the Report of the 1987 Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT), are inevitably referred to frequently. More specific and ephemeral documents, such as speeches by ministers or the lengthy correspondence they and their officials engaged in with the principal advisory body, SEAC, are also used to fill in the details of the story. However, to have relied solely on such sources would have given a false impression of policy-making being conducted only through official channels, ignoring the many whose opinions, privately or publicly expressed, influence the thinking of the decision-makers within Government. To find out exactly who was

actually involved in shaping policies inside Government would have required a different approach from the one I have adopted here; even someone who has chaired a quango must rely largely on hearsay and surmise for that. But, to place the policy-making in the wider context of the public debate about the National Curriculum and assessment, I have made extensive use of quotations from the popular, broadsheet and specialist press. A fourth type of source, academic studies of the National Curriculum and national assessment, has been used less frequently. Such studies are already offering a growing body of relevant evidence and interpretation but this is not a book which is written primarily for an academic audience. It is more an account of policies in the making than a review of the research into those policies and their impact on the system.

Readers interested in developments in Wales may be disappointed to find so little attention being given to that country, especially in a book written by someone who is an advocate of a more distinctive National Curriculum (not just a modified version of what is largely decided in England) for pupils in Welsh schools. The explanation lies in the fact that, while the 1988 Act has, perhaps inadvertently (Jones, 1994), been a catalyst for significant steps towards a distinctive *curriculum* for the schools of Wales, there has been no move to date to define, still less to develop, policies on *assessment* which differ from those adopted in England.

The national assessment story is different in Wales in two matters of detail within a common policy framework. One National Curriculum subject, Welsh, is a requirement only in Wales and the assessment of some pupils in other subjects takes place through the medium of Welsh (Wiliam, 1994). In fact it seems to have gone largely unnoticed in England that perhaps the biggest success story of all in the decidedly chequered history of implementing the National Curriculum is the introduction of Welsh as a school subject for all pupils and the development of generally well-received assessment methods and materials (Williams *et al.,* 1993). The story of National Curriculum and assessment in Wales is an interesting one, worth telling, but it is not the purpose of this book to do so. Rightly or wrongly, the policy framework for National Curriculum and assessment remains, for the time being at least, an England and Wales one, with Wales 'opting out' of it only when what is proposed in London proves so unpalatable to Welsh Office ministers that they are moved to go down a different route from that taken by their counterparts in the Department for Education.

The book is arranged so that the story of the period begins and ends with an overview of policy, while the main events in between are dealt with topic by topic. Thus, after a necessarily brief sketch in chapter 1 of the decade prior to 1987, chapter 2 is concerned with the foundations of the system which were erected during 1987 and 1988, in particular the TGAT Report. Chapters 3 to 6 deal in turn with the national tests, teacher assessment, moderation, reporting and publishing of results, and the largely separate story of 'Key Stage 4'. Events referred to in those chapters occurred mainly in the years from 1989 to 1992. In 1993 all aspects of the curriculum and assessment system came to be considered together as the case for fundamental review became, belatedly, unanswerable. The different strands

discussed separately in the previous four chapters are therefore interwoven in the story of events from the autumn of 1992 to the summer of 1994. Since my main reason for writing the book was to provide an accessible account of how policy evolved, it is only in the conclusion, chapter 8, that I have gone beyond the role of informed commentator on events to offer a more general analysis of policy and of policy-making.

The book would not have been completed if it had not been for the encouragement and help I have received from colleagues. In particular, I am indebted to Peter Dines, Mary James and Kathleen Tattersall for their detailed comments on sections of the manuscript. Grateful though I am to them, the responsibility for any factual errors and for the opinions expressed is, of course, entirely mine.

By the time this is being read, the story of national assessment policy will have moved on. If an account of the first six years can help reinforce the case for an assessment system which seeks to enhance the learning of the individual pupil—the only point at which 'standards' have any real meaning—the telling of this story will have served some purpose.

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July 1994

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The Policy Context

Introduction

A national system of assessing pupils in England and Wales throughout the eleven years of compulsory schooling was one of several radical provisions of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Central Government policy on national assessment, the specific focus of this book, must necessarily be considered alongside policy on the curriculum to which that assessment relates. A National Curriculum could have been introduced without any associated assessment arrangements at the national level, but, following re-election in June 1987, a new Conservative Government committed itself to a system in which assessment of pupil attainment would, it was argued, complement and reinforce curriculum objectives. Other writers have sought to explain and interpret the origins and outcomes of National Curriculum policy, referring in so doing to decisions on how that curriculum should be assessed (for example, Lawton, 1989; Pring, 1989; Kelly, 1989). This account reverses that emphasis, considering curriculum policy only in so far as it is necessary to explain and interpret policy on assessment.

The Education Reform Act also brought in other major changes for publicly-maintained schools in England and Wales, affecting their funding and control, as well as important provisions in respect of other sectors of education. The 1988 Act, the seventh in a series of Education Acts introduced since the election of a Conservative Government in 1979, was to be the most substantial and wide-ranging of Government initiatives to change the education system and, more particularly, the control of that system. Much has also been written since on the significance, taken together, of the diverse provisions of the 1988 Act (for example, Simon, 1988; Maclure, 1989; Bash and Coulby, 1989; Flude and Hammer, 1989).

The chapters which follow do not seek to cover the same ground as those who have analyzed policy, either on National Curriculum or, more broadly, in relation to the 1988 Act taken as a whole. Attention is focused instead on the assessment of pupil attainment as an element in the education policies of central Government. The period covered by this account runs from the consultation paper in July 1987, which preceded what was then termed *The Great Education Reform Bill* (which would in due course be enacted as the 1988 Act), through to mid-1994 when the

first major review of National Curriculum and assessment policy was near to completion.

While the scope of the policy considered here in detail is limited to national assessment over that seven-year period, it would be unsatisfactory simply to start the story in mid-1987. Then, in the wake of a third successive Conservative election victory, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Kenneth Baker, formally announced his intention to introduce legislation which would implement, for the first time in England and Wales, a national system of assessment of pupils from the age of 5 through to 16. However, the origins of that decision to centralize control of the curriculum and of assessment can be traced back at least to the early 1970s. The 1976 Ruskin College speech of the then Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, can be seen as the first significant stage in a process which saw the educational system in England and Wales abandon the post-war assumptions of curriculum policy being essentially matters for schools and local education authorities to determine. The Conservative Party policies which were the antecedents of those which influenced the provisions of the 1988 Act can be traced back through the internal Party debates of the 1980s to the period in the late 1970s when the Party, then in Opposition, formulated a more explicit, more radical policy for education (Knight, 1990).

An outline of the place of assessment in the policy debate inside and outside the Conservative Party in the fifteen years prior to the 1988 Act may therefore be helpful in interpreting decisions taken in 1987 and subsequently.

The 1970s Curriculum Debate

Prior to the intervention in 1976 of the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, on a wide range of education policy issues, there was already a debate about the school curriculum in progress at the national (England and Wales) level. In an era when a large and growing percentage of pupils who attended maintained schools were in primary and secondary schools, the intake of which was not selected by ability, questions were inevitably posed about the nature of the common curriculum experience those pupils should be offered. That debate was conducted on the basis that the responsibility for curriculum remained, in the terms of the 1944 Education Act, with local education authorities and schools. However, Callaghan's speech can be seen in retrospect to signal the start of a period of several years during which the Government Department responsible for Education, the DES, and the Schools Inspectorate, HMI, would take the lead in influencing the terms of the curriculum debate. In time, central Government would move from a stance of urging schools and LEAs to rethink curriculum policy to one, in the form of the 1988 Act, of requiring them to do so.

For much of the 1970s curriculum debate, assessment figured in a relatively minor, supporting role. Central Government already had, in 1974, taken steps through the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) to obtain evidence from a 2

per cent sample of pupils in order to to monitor pupil attainment. The terms of reference of the APU included:

> to identify significant differences of achievement related to the circumstances in which children learn, including the incidence of under-achievement, and to make the findings available to those concerned with resource allocation within the Department (of Education and Science), local education authorities and schools.

While maintaining for the most part a relatively low profile, the APU was one means by which Government could gather evidence on what was becoming, by the mid-1970s, a major policy issue—trends in educational 'standards'.

Government statements on the curriculum of this period typically referred to the importance of raising (as yet undefined) standards and to public examinations and other forms of assessment as sources of evidence on which to base judgments about such standards. Callaghan himself edged towards a position of more direct Government action on the curriculum when he said in his Ruskin speech:

> It is not my intention to become enmeshed in such problems as whether there should be a basic curriculum with universal standards—though I am inclined to think that there should be…(quoted in Moon *et al.,* 1989)

He stopped short, however, of advocating that Government should give a lead in defining that 'basic curriculum' and measuring those 'universal standards'.

In the Green Paper, *Education in Schools: a Consultative Document* (July 1977), which rounded off what was termed the 'Great Debate' on education in the months following Callaghan's speech, one of the main sections was headed 'Standards and assessment'. It argued for 'a coherent and soundly-based means of assessment for the educational system, for schools, and for individual pupils' (p. 16). A further ten years would elapse before the Task Group on Assessment and Testing would be given the job of devising just such a national system of assessment.

In 1977, and in the decade which followed, the assessment of attainment was discussed, at least in official policy documents, in terms of making better use of already existing arrangements, perhaps in modified form. Thus the Green Paper, when considering standards at the national level, relied (apart from a brief reference to the APU) on the work of HM Inspectorate, 'the traditional and long established means for assessing the performance of the educational system as a whole' (p. 16). Referring to assessment of the performance of schools, the Green Paper was equally cautious in advocating improved use of existing evidence. More radical steps were not then favoured. For example:

> 'league tables' of school performance based on examination or standardized test results in isolation can be seriously misleading because they fail to take

> account of other important factors such as the wide differences between school catchment areas. (*ibid,* p. 17)

When turning to the assessment of individual pupils, the Green Paper tentatively reviewed the case for change in public examinations for 16- and 18-year-olds (and a possible new certificate for 17-year-olds) but was clearly not yet ready to move to a decision on any of the proposals then under consideration. As to the possibility of new national tests for other age groups:

> It has been suggested that individual pupils should at certain ages take external 'tests of basic literacy and numeracy', the implication being that those tests should be of national character and universally applied. The Government rejects this view. Because of the differing abilities and rates of development of children of school age, tests pitched at a single level could be irrelevant for some and beyond the reach of others. Moreover the temptation for schools to coach for such tests would risk distorting the curriculum and possibly lowering rather than raising average standards. (*ibid,* p. 18)

The Green Paper did signal the intention of the Secretaries of State (for Education and for Wales) to 'seek to establish a broad agreement with their partners in the education service on a framework for the curriculum' (*ibid,* p. 12). But, for all the rhetoric of 'it is not sufficient just to maintain present standards; the schools like the nation as a whole have to meet the growing and changing demands of the future', there was clearly no mood for radical change in assessment policy and practice (or indeed in curriculum policy) among the officials who drafted the Green Paper or the ministers who approved it. The agenda which would shape developments in the late 1980s was already in evidence among the possible courses of action considered, but then rejected, in the Green Paper—regular testing of all pupils in basic skills, national monitoring of standards, performance tables enabling parents and the public to compare schools. In 1977 that agenda was the agenda of voices on the Right of the Conservative Party. It had yet to reach even the stage of being adopted as official Party policy (see Knight, 1990), still less of dominating education policy-making in Government.

The Early 1980s: Concluding the Debate

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a series of publications on the school curriculum, from the Department of Education and Science, from HM In-spectorate, and from others such as the main national advisory body on curriculum and examinations, the Schools Council. Each was written in the context of the intention to reach agreement on a national framework for the school curriculum (see Moon *et al.* (1989) for a helpful chronology of these and other landmarks along the road towards a National Curriculum). A closer look at *A View of the Curriculum* from HMI

(1980) and *The School Curriculum* from the DES (1981) is instructive for what they reveal about HMI and DES thinking on assessment at that time.

The HMI paper discusses the curriculum in terms of a broad framework within which teachers and schools determine what learning experiences are appropriate:

> the broad definition of the purposes of school education is a shared responsibility, whereas the detailed means by which they may best be realized in individual schools and for individual children are a matter for professional judgment. (*A View of the Curriculum,* p. 2)

This leads HMI to a view of standards and how they should be measured which locates the individual teacher at the centre of the system:

> The successful implementation of different programmes for different pupils also puts a premium on teachers' sense of 'standards'; they need to be able to formulate appropriate expectations of what individual children should know or be able to do at a given stage. In order to feel assured that their expectations are reasonably pitched, they need bearings outside as well as inside the school: that is, they need to know how children of similar ages and broadly similar circumstances perform in comparison with their own pupils, locally and nationally. Comparative information such as the Assessment of Performance Unit is beginning to supply will be helpful to teachers in this respect; programmes of sample local testing by LEAs may give other points of reference; public examinations at 16+ already provide bench marks at the end of the period of compulsory education. (*ibid,* p. 3)

In this HMI view of things, standards grow out of the collective experiences of professional teachers. 'Bench marks' are acknowledged as necessary, though the sources of them referred to in the last sentence would not begin to do justice to the range of learning encompassed across eleven years of compulsory schooling. *A View of the Curriculum* concludes by advocating 'further defining parts of the curriculum' including 'statements identifying necessary skills and knowledge' (p. 23). The DES/ Welsh Office paper, *The School Curriculum,* has even less to say about the place of assessment in any agreed curriculum framework. It recommends:

> Schools should…analyze and set out their aims in writing, and make it part of their work regularly to assess how far the education they provide matches those aims. Such assessments should apply not only to the school as a whole but also to each individual pupil…(*The School Curriculum,* p. 20)

Apart from a routine discussion of the role of public examinations at the end of compulsory schooling it would seem that nothing is envisaged beyond the use by schools and teachers of their own means of assessing attainment.

The sequence of DES and HMI curriculum policy papers can be regarded as having begun in 1977 with publication of the Green Paper and of the HMI 'working papers' *Curriculum 11–16*. It was concluded in 1985 with *Better Schools* and, from HMI, *The Curriculum from 5 to 16*. As in their predecessors, some attention is given to the role of assessment.

While HMI were by this time more strongly advocating clearer definition of expectations and improved methods of assessment, their perception of the nature and purposes of assessment remained clearly rooted in the day-to-day interaction of teachers and pupils. 'From time to time informal assessment needs to be supported by more objective forms of testing' (p. 52), for example by the 'occasional use' of standardized tests. But 'assessment is inseparable from the teaching process since its prime purpose is to improve pupils' performance' (p. 51).

In contrast the DES, in *Better Schools,* discusses assessment mainly in the context of external public examinations for secondary school students. The chapter entitled 'Examinations and assessment' is noticeably more positive than the equivalent section of the 1977 Green Paper. In addition to the established examinations for 16- and 18-year-olds it notes development work on the use of graded assessments and on records of achievement, the introduction of which was by then a Government policy commitment. In the preceding, and more substantial, chapter on curriculum policy, one of four 'strands' in moving towards agreed objectives for the curriculum is the definition of 'levels of attainment'. Defining desired levels of attainment for 16-year-olds of differing abilities is described as a 'necessary step' towards the longer-term goal of 'a more precise definition…of what pupils of different abilities should understand, know and be able to do' (p. 26). But 'it will be no short or easy task to move towards a more precise definition of attainment targets'. External assessment procedures, apart from public examinations for older secondary pupils, are not yet in evidence as a component in Government thinking:

> Assessment of each pupil's performance is a complex professional task, in which a wide range of evidence has to be taken into account …
>
> The teacher's assessment of pupil performance is also the basis of a school's evaluation of its own performance. (*Better Schools,* p. 27)

These HMI and DES policy papers are the product of an era when the main aim in education policy as it related to schools was a clearer definition, arrived at by consensus, of the aims and scope of the school curriculum. Assessment puts in an appearance in a relatively minor, supporting role. It is as if the process of definition of curriculum objectives would, in itself, result in higher standards of attainment. There is no hint, in the many pages of discussion, of schools and teachers being required, as distinct from encouraged, to assess their pupils' attainment at more regular intervals and on a more systematic basis.

Changes in Conservative Party Policy 1981–1986

However, over the period when these DES and HMI papers were published, Conservative Party policy on education was already moving towards a more interventionist view. Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science from 1981 until his resignation in 1986 had a key role in shaping as well as implementing education policy during that period. In a seminal speech to the North of England Education Conference at Sheffield in January 1984 he announced three major policy initiatives. First, he set a target of bringing 80 to 90 per cent of pupils up to the standards then attained by the average pupil. This initiative was in keeping with Joseph's longstanding view that underachievement by the pupil of average or below average ability was a serious cause for concern. But he also stressed that his objective of higher standards of attainment applied to all students and not just those stigmatized as 'less able'. Second, he argued that the public examination system should be shifted from an emphasis on placing candidates in rank order relative to each other to describing results in terms of what candidates had demonstrated they were capable of doing. Joseph believed that employers would welcome information on the specific skills and understandings shown by pupils in the course of being examined. Third, Joseph asserted the need for clearly-defined curriculum objectives, agreed by parents and employers, as a means of ensuring that pupils aspired to, and teachers helped them reach, the highest possible standards.

If Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of October 1976 inaugurated a period of more active involvement by central Government in the debate about curriculum policy, it was Joseph's Sheffield speech which heralded significant elements in the policies which would shape the legislation of the late 1980s. Curriculum legislation was not yet foreshadowed as such but the Government was making very clear its intention to move to specifying curriculum objectives and to involving parents and employers in that process. If curriculum objectives, rather than the more broadly-stated aims which had featured in the curriculum statements of the late seventies and early eighties, were to be defined at national level, questions would inevitably arise as to the extent to which schools would be expected to plan the curriculum in those terms. Also, once curriculum objectives had been spelled out, questions about the assessment of attainment in relation to those objectives would, equally inevitably, be posed.

The main context in which Joseph was able to implement the ideas expressed in his Sheffield speech, prior to the introduction of legislation, was the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). The GCSE replaced the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary ('O') level examination and the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) during the period 1986 to 1988, with the first certificates being awarded in 1988. The decision to proceed with introducing what was referred to as a 'common examination system for pupils at 16+' had been taken by his predecessor, Mark Carlisle, but it was Joseph's ideas which gave the GCSE the characteristics of a major reform of both curriculum and assessment for the 14–16 age group. For those ideas to have such an influence on that stage of

schooling did not require new legislation. Examination certificates were issued by the examination boards but were countersigned by an Under Secretary in the DES; through that convention the Government had the means to shape policy even though syllabuses and examining remained the responsibility of independent examination boards. During 1985 and 1986 the Secretary of State for Education took a close interest in plans for the new examination.

In line with the first of the policy initiatives in his Sheffield speech, Joseph announced that, unlike the examinations it replaced, the GCSE would be designed for all pupils who could benefit from it. 'O' level and CSE had, taken together, been intended to cater for the top 60 per cent of the assumed 'ability range', though in practice a larger proportion of the age cohort actually entered for those examinations (with the numbers entered varying both regionally and from subject to subject). Additionally, he announced that candidates would be awarded grades, however modest they might be in absolute terms, which were based on the 'positive achievement' they had demonstrated (as distinct from the lowest grades being based on having picked up a handful of marks on questions which were very largely beyond the candidates' reach). One of Joseph's favourite concepts across the whole field of social policy, that of 'differentiation', was also to be a guiding principle for GCSE. All syllabuses and examination schemes were required to specify the methods which would be used to differentiate the curriculum and its associated assessment arrangements so that they were appropriate across the wide ability range of students taking GCSE courses.

The second and third of Joseph's Sheffield initiatives were taken forward in the context of GCSE through the concept of 'grade criteria' (see chapter 6). For each aspect of each subject examined, specific curriculum objectives would be defined; the curriculum, the way student attainment was assessed and the way it was reported would all, it was hoped, be explicitly linked to prespecified objectives.

A further defining feature of the GCSE was the contribution which work assessed by the students' own teachers during the course ('coursework') would make to the overall grade awarded at the end of the examination. Such assessment had typically been more prominent in the lower-status CSE than in the high-status GCE 'O' level but in Joseph's view such activities as practical work in the sciences or oral competence in languages were vital parts of the new GCSE curriculum. Through a combination of coursework assessment and end-of-course examinations the procedures leading to the award of GCSE grades would, it was argued, ensure a valid assessment of that new curriculum.

Thus during the period 1984 to 1986, curriculum and assessment policy for the 14–16 age group was being determined by ministers in the Department of Education and Science and guided by policy parameters which would be carried forward into the design of a national assessment system. Through GCSE there would be, from 1986, a common curriculum and assessment framework set out in 'General Criteria' and subject-specific 'National Criteria' in each of the main subjects examined. Both general and subject-specific criteria were, though matters for extensive consultation, ultimately for the Secretary of State to approve. The

curriculum and assessment framework was couched in terms which implicitly accepted the virtues of a model which described attainment in terms of a series of specific, assessable curriculum objectives. Moreover, when it came to certificating attainment, not only was it expected that 'grade criteria' would guide the design and marking of assessed tasks, but the results would be reported in those terms. In other words, the new curriculum and its assessment would be 'criterion-referenced'.

The Mid 1980s: National Assessment Takes Shape

Yet, however firmly the Conservative Government seems to have been set on a course of taking responsibility for decisions on curriculum and assessment policy, it was far from clear at the time of Joseph's 1984 speech and the GCSE developments which followed that a similar intervention would follow in respect of the curriculum for younger pupils and the assessment of pupils before the age of 16.

Much attention in the general literature on Conservative education policy has been given to identifying several, often conflicting, strands of thinking among those who were active in party policy-making (see Ball, 1990; Lawton, 1992). Ball, for example, in his analysis of 'New Right' ideas on education within the Conservative Party, argues that thinking about the role of assessment:

> bridges between a neo-liberal, free-market concern, for the making of comparisons between schools and teachers in order to facilitate informed parental choice, and the neo-conservative distrust both of teachers and of new teacher-based forms of assessment. (Ball, 1990, p. 52)

At times 'neo-liberals' and 'neo-conservatives' were united in opposition to the education policies actually implemented by the Conservative Government. The GCSE, for example, with too much Government involvement for the former group and too much reliance on teachers' own assessments for the latter, was viewed with suspicion by all shades of opinion on the Right of the Conservative Party.

The interviews conducted by Ball with some of the key participants, politicians and officials, in the policy decisions leading up to the decision to legislate for a National Curriculum and assessment system, reveal some of the influences at work in policy-making. One of these was the trend in vocational education, mainly in the further education sector rather than in schools, to define and measure basic skills and competences.

By the mid-1980s, employers' organizations were increasingly expressing discontent with conventional means of grading attainment and arguing for receiving from schools information which revealed what had been attained and went beyond the familiar lists of grades in academic subject examinations. The Director of Education at the Confederation of British Industries was enthusiastic about the advantages of an assessed National Curriculum:

> there are some immeasurable benefits that will arise from the Na-tional Curriculum and the associated bits of it, the GCSE exams. Because it will set standards, and it will provide the testing, and the testing will not only provide for pupils but it will also, by implication, be testing the teachers as well. (Webb, quoted in Ball, 1990, p. 111)

Developments in other countries, notably the USA and the Federal Republic of Germany, were also drawn into the discussions about curriculum and assessment policy. Indeed, Ball argues that the final linking of National Curriculum and National Testing seems to have been firmed up in this way.

It was clear that, by 1986, there was 'indirect evidence of the DES interest in an assessment-led mode of curriculum change and control' (*ibid,* p. 164) though a DES Under-Secretary, recalling the events of the period, remembers the question of whether to legislate not being 'at all settled' by the autumn of 1986 (*ibid,* p. 182). In the view of the same official 'the relationship between assessment and a prescribed curriculum were the clear objectives' though 'the curriculum push did come from a separate place from the original assessment and testing push'. Pressed to say where these policy positions were fought out, he added:

> it wasn't just within the DES, it was within the DES and within the Centre for Policy Studies, No. 10 Policy Unit and Cabinet, and all the usual people that are involved in policy formulation…which is nothing unusual, nothing different from normal policy formulation. (quoted in *ibid,* p. 183)

A picture thus emerges of a policy debate within Government and the Conservative Party about the potential shape of legislation in which there would be a statutory National Curriculum and also a requirement on schools and teachers to assess pupil attainment at regular intervals throughout their compulsory schooling. Such legislation would not only be directed towards specifying and raising standards of attainment by making them clearer to pupils, teachers and schools. Also, in the words of the same DES official, 'by having a National Curriculum and assessment you provide a basis for information to be given to parents about what is happening' (*ibid,* p. 183), information which parents could use when making decisions about their own child's future and when, acting collectively, they were deciding whether a school should 'opt out' of LEA control. A national system for assessing attainment thus became not only integral to the curriculum debate, it was also to be a vital source of evidence for empowering the parent in the process of redistributing powers within the education system.

The identities of 'all the usual people' involved in policy formulation are not entirely clear, though the members of one Right-wing 'think tank', the Centre for Policy Studies, seem to have been especially close to the process of shaping the policies enacted in 1988 Education Act, both in the period leading up to it and in subsequent years as its provisions were implemented. But it would be a mistake to see the influence of the Conservative Right as taking Government policy on

assessment in a particular direction. Even as the debate moved to the point of decisions on policy, contrasting views on the virtues of a centrally-defined, Government-controlled, policy on curriculum and assessment were still very much in evidence within the Conservative Party. This can be illustrated by reference to two policy statements, both of them from right-wing sources and both published in 1987. Stuart Sexton, in *Our Schools—A Radical Policy,* takes a stance on issues such as central control and the role of examinations and assessment, markedly different from that of The Hillgate Group in *The Reform of British Education*.

On control, Sexton argued that:

> …the wisdom of parents separately and individually exercised, but taken together becoming their 'collective wisdom', is more likely to achieve higher standards more quickly, and more acceptably to the public, than the collective wisdom of the present bureaucrats, no matter how well meaning those bureaucrats may be. (Sexton 1987, p. 9)
>
> Regardless of which Government is in power, centralization of education becomes, in practice, bureaucratic control by the civil servants at the centre…
>
> More central government control over education would be disastrous, and is the least likely way of raising standards or of spending the money more efficiently. (*ibid,* p. 7)

In contrast, for the Hillgate Group:

> The eventual liberation of schools raises the important question as to what controls are exercised over what goes on in them. The eternal vigilance of parents is neither to be expected nor desired. Sensible parents are usually too busy to ruminate on the niceties of the curriculum…
>
> We therefore sympathise with the Government's call for a National Curriculum, and for continuous assessment of standards… (Hillgate Group 1987, p. 5)

On assessment and examinations, Sexton (1987) suggests:

> that the Department of Education and the Secretary of State should pull out completely from the examinations scene…It is far better for the examinations to be run by bodies which are independent of Government. (p. 26)

But for the Hillgate Group (1987):

> Priority should be given to establishing a statutory framework for national attainment targets and tests, and for the publication of information. (p. 17)

They go on to dismiss in turn each of the counter arguments that 'teachers will concentrate on the tests and neglect the rest of their tasks', that 'the publication of

so much information will be misleading and harmful' and that 'information about attainment will be used to make unfair comparisons'.

Conclusion

By the time the crucial decisions were taken to legislate for a National Curriculum and for a national assessment system, the interventionist 'paternalist' element in Conservative Party thinking, much closer to the Hillgate Group than to Sexton and the Institute of Economic Affairs, had clearly gained the upper hand on this aspect of policy. Ironically both the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (see p. 31) and the former Secretary of State, by now Lord Joseph, who had done more than any other individual to change the course of Conservative policy, were clearly unhappy about the degree of central control which the 1988 Act would vest in the Secretary of State.

However, as is so often the case with a major policy initiative, neither the 1988 Act in general, nor the national assessment system in particular, can be interpreted in terms of a single clearly-stated set of ideas informing every aspect of it. In reviewing the policy debate leading up to it and the policy decisions which followed in the course of implementing its provisions:

> it is a mistake to look for ideological coherence in the Act as a whole. It is a messy set of compromises between neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies. (Lawton, 1992, p. 49)