

A. V. Kelly

The Curriculum

theory and practice

F I F T H E D I T I O N



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Theory and Practice

Fifth Edition

A.V. Kelly

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For Katherine, my granddaughter, who has still
to survive the system

The teacher, like the artist, the philosopher and the man of letters, can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority.

Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (1950:159)

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Introduction

The first edition of this book was published at a time when an understanding of the complexities of the curriculum and of curriculum planning was evolving at a quite rapid rate. That evolution was due to two interrelated factors. First, significant changes were occurring in the curricula of schools, both in the UK and elsewhere, especially in the USA, as educationists and teachers sought to develop forms of curricular provision which would be more appropriate to the economic, social and, indeed, political conditions of the twentieth century. And, second, there was inevitably extensive theoretical reflection on these changes; indeed, the value of the work of bodies such as the Schools Council in England and Wales at that time may be said to lie more in the theoretical insights it generated than in any changes in the practices of schools and teachers which it brought about.

In 1977, then, our first edition set out to draw together some of these many insights for the benefit both of practitioners and of students of curriculum. In particular, it was offered in the hope that it might contribute in some small way to a bridging of the gap between the theory and practice of education by convincing teachers of the importance of developing a theoretical underpinning to their work. For a crucial premise of the book was a conviction that without this, as the Foreword to the first edition said, ‘there can be no effective curriculum development no matter how hard people try from outside the school to promote it’.

Only five years later, in 1982, the second edition began by acknowledging that it was being offered in a significantly different climate, that ‘shades of the prison house’ were beginning to close in around pupils and teachers. There was still sufficient optimism, however, for the same fundamental positions to be taken – the importance of sound theoretical reflection on practice and the justification of this in terms of the centrality of the teacher to effective curriculum development. However, a further, and perhaps prophetic, argument was advanced in support of these positions – the need for teachers to have a sound theoretical perspective as a defence against the imposition on them of policies framed by amateurs, as we expressed it in the Introduction to the second edition, the placing of curriculum control ‘in the hands of others who are in no position to exercise it effectively’.

By 1989, when the third edition was published, a number of battles had been lost, and the Introduction to that edition described the extent to which the social and political climate of curriculum planning had changed. ‘The

background constraints on curriculum planning have moved into the foreground; indeed, constraints have become directives; concern with curriculum evaluation has grown into demands for teacher appraisal and accountability; the role of the teacher in curriculum planning and development, whose centrality both earlier editions were concerned to stress, has been rapidly eroded and dramatically reduced in scope; the evolutionary process of curriculum development has been effectively halted; and, in general, the ‘secret garden’ of the curriculum has been thrown open to the public – an event which, as in many other stately homes, has led to ossification as well as preservation and to much trampling on the flower-beds.

Clearly, in writing that, one had in mind the dramatic change in policy in England and Wales which culminated in the 1988 Education Act and the establishment of the National Curriculum and its paraphernalia of regular assessment and inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). But, while perhaps this development was particularly extreme in its scope and its effects, similar changes were to be seen occurring elsewhere, so that the problems identified there had to be seen as not merely of parochial concern in England and Wales, or even in the UK as a whole, but as problems which could be seen in one shape or another besetting educational provision throughout the ‘free’ world.

In that context, the third edition reiterated the fundamental principles which had been the underpinning of its two predecessors. To these it added, however, that there was an obligation on politicians and their advisers (a category which, according to well substantiated rumour, included hairdressers and cleaners), since they had taken on the role of curriculum planners, to develop a proper understanding that ‘the planning of an educational programme is a far more sophisticated activity than most of the present amateur planners seem able, or willing, to recognize, and that it necessitates an intellectual depth of understanding which they manifestly lack’, since ‘the over-simplification of curricular issues puts education itself at risk and must lead to a lowering of educational standards rather than that raising of standards which current policies purport to be seeking’.

Of particular interest, then, in the context of this book and its history, are two developments which can be observed to have occurred in the years since its first publication. First, there has been that inevitable loss of those many insights the first edition attempted to summarize and collate, which is the corollary of the loss of independence of judgement for teachers. The school curriculum has ceased to evolve, indeed in many places (most notably in provision for primary education, and especially the early years) it has been forced back to an earlier and more primitive form. And those insights which had emerged from the attempts at curriculum change and evolution of the 1960s and 1970s have been ignored and in fact stifled. In the face of political dictation on the scale we have witnessed, therefore, the curriculum debate has

come to seem increasingly pointless and the evolution of curricular understandings has been severely retarded if not halted altogether. Perhaps the best evidence of this is that this edition, like the fourth edition, has had to continue to rely on illustrations drawn from earlier experimentation and practice along with the theoretical debates which these fuelled, since little that is more recent has been able to emerge. And the changes in practice which recent years have seen amount to little more than a feeble attempt to patch up the inadequacies of the simplistic policies which have been imposed and the inevitable disasters to which they have led.

Second, however, there has arisen a new debate, focused on the politicization of education and its implications not only for education itself but also for the very notion of democracy and the concept of the 'free' society. There has been a significant shift of focus onto the political processes themselves and an increased interest in concepts of democracy, their implications for educational provision, the impact of competing ideologies, the use of testing, inspection and the legitimization of discourse as a strategy of political control and a long list of similar issues arising from reflection on the process of politicization itself. And, while this will inevitably lead to a parochial focus on the schooling system in England and Wales, its wider intention is to alert others who may be contemplating similar practices to their dangers and their implications.

In the current context, therefore, the two central tasks of this revision continue to be to identify the major implications for education in the genuine sense of the process of politicization which the intervening years have seen, and to reaffirm the open debate about curriculum which that process has largely stifled. The concern must be to maintain the understandings and insights which were the fruits of that wide-ranging debate of earlier times and to view the politicization process from the perspective they provide.

Furthermore, this edition has been written in the context of an educational climate in England and Wales in which the warnings offered earlier are beginning to prove well founded, when the mistakes made by the politicians and others, ignoring professional advice, have begun to show themselves and when significant attempts to correct these mistakes are being made, albeit in a spirit of patching up rather than of recognizing that the emerging flaws are too fundamental for this to be effective. In particular, the inadequacies of too great central planning and control are now being recognized (as was foretold by the professionals at the outset) as being at the heart of most of what is wrong with the system. This is the current explanation offered by the Conservative Party – with no acknowledgement that that system is its own creation.

Hence this edition will again emphasize the fundamental principles which earlier editions stressed. It will now, however, seek to identify the effects of ignoring these principles. And, since a significant proportion of the readers of earlier editions appear to be working in other countries and in other systems, it will offer them the experience of England and Wales as a paradigm of what

should be avoided in educational planning.

This fifth edition, then, while yielding no ground in relation to the values and principles which have been consistently advocated since 1977 by all four of its antecedents, must continue to advocate the need for changes not only in emphasis but also in conception, and for continued discussion of all aspects of Curriculum Studies.

The concern continues to be to identify the key questions which the student of curriculum and the responsible professional educator must address in the current social and political context. And it is encouraging to know that the number of people who are still interested in addressing them is sufficient to warrant a fifth edition of a book which, unlike many others, will continue to affirm the values and principles which prompted its first publication twenty-seven years ago.