

A COMMON CORE CANADIAN CURRICULUM?

In this review of an early book by Robin Barrow – then a visiting scholar from England – titled *The Canadian Curriculum: A Personal View*, Antoinette Oberg starts by summarizing: “The stance Barrow takes is that education, and particularly Canadian education, has fallen prey to the shoddy reasoning of the progressives, and is consequently operating on the shaky basis of vague and often vacuous platitudes.”¹ Anticipating the education policies of the soon-to-be installed (1979) Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – and the ascendancy of right-wing Republicans in the United States (1980) – Barrow proposed a “national core curriculum, with attendant changes in teaching methodology and teacher preparation.”² What education suffers, Oberg continues (quoting Barrow) is the failure to “think things through.”³ Barrow alleged that Canadian educational scholarship and provincial curriculum guidelines were (again quoting Barrow) littered with “untestable abstractions.”⁴ In Barrow’s view, provincial educational aims are often “trite and jargonistic,” without meaning at either the school or classroom level because they are “too vague to guide or direct practice.”⁵ One instance is the phrase “education for adaptability to a changing world.”⁶ Oberg concurs, wondering: “How frequently are similar platitudinous statements encountered (“develop the individual to his full potential,” “progress according to his own rate,” “becoming a contributing member of society”) and how infrequently do teachers find them useful in short and long term plans.”⁷ She judges “Barrow’s response to this situation” as “eminently reasonable,” praising him for avoiding “behavioural objectives” but acknowledging “the need to elaborate and clarify educational purposes.”⁸ Barrow proposes a “procedure ... for thinking clearly about educational purposes,” one that requires everyone “to focus systematically on three elements: (1) the meaning or precise definition of terms used; (2) the coherence of the argument or hypothesis or proposal; and (3) the validity of the empirical claims on which the argument, hypothesis, or proposal is based.”⁹ Apparently Barrow walks his talk, as the book communicates his “think[ing] through” including a version of the canonical curriculum question: “what the school should be teaching and why.”¹⁰ It turns out that “thinking through” means expressing “his views on a wide array of topics, including the virtues and flaws of radical and progressive modes of thought, the nature of teaching, appropriate programs for faculties of education, and the disciplines which should serve as the foundation for the study of education.”¹¹ Barrow is keen on a core curriculum.¹² He also advises incorporating the hidden curriculum into the official one, itself planned with sociopolitical sensitivity.¹³

Concerning a “common core curriculum,” Barrow (in Oberg’s summary) “carefully elucidates” his three reasons, the first of which constitutes an “argument from knowledge,” the second an “argument from culture,” and the third, an “argument from Culture.”¹⁴ Because “there is some objective and supra-cultural knowledge, it

should be taught to all students in the schools”: that’s the first “argument.”¹⁵ (“Assertion” seems a more precise term than “argument.”). “The second argument,” Oberg continues, “rests on an unstated assumption that there is a common aim for education,” and the third is Barrow’s belief “that some elements of culture are of higher quality,”¹⁶ hence capital “C” Culture.

Barrow's proposed common core curriculum has “three stages,” the first (or elementary) one comprised of “numeracy, computer competence, literacy, health, exploring, and moral development.”¹⁷ The second stage or “transitional year” is “year eight,” when students study “the natural sciences, mathematics, and the fine arts, after which they enter the “secondary stage,” one “devoted to English, history, social studies, and French.”¹⁸ Oberg concludes: “For all its shortcomings and its abbreviated treatment of a number of complex and important topics, Barrow’s work contains a perceptive comment on the state of educational thought in Canada.”¹⁹ Oberg deems his proposals “reasonable.”²⁰

COMMENTARY

“Barrow’s book appears to have some intriguing insights,” Anton Birioukov-Brant commented in his report to me. He noted that in Britain there was movement toward installing a core curriculum and that “in his critique of progressive and radical schools of educational thought, Barrow may be mirroring the reactionary movement away from critical theories emerging and gaining ground during this period of time.” Quite so. What is surprising, then, is how conformist the prolific philosopher of education (1976a, b, 1979, 1980, 1981a, b, 1982a, b, 1984a, b, 1990, 1993, 2008, with Milburn 1986) – who later became dean of Simon Fraser University’s Faculty of Education – appears to have been at this stage in his career. Also surprising that Antoinette Oberg (1980, 1987, 1990, 2003, Chambers 2004) – who also led a notable career that included significant autobiographical studies of education – found Barrow’s proposals “reasonable.”

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ENDNOTES

¹ Oberg 1980, 93.

² Oberg 1980, 93. Almost another ten years would pass before a national core curriculum was established in Britain in 1988.

³ Quoted in Oberg 1980, 94.

⁴ Quoted in Oberg 1980, 94. Wouldn't the phrase "thinking things through" qualify as one?

⁵ Oberg 1980, 94. Implied is that teachers are incapable of directing their own professional conduct.

⁶ Quoted in Oberg 1980, 94. See research brief #76.

⁷ Oberg 1980, 94.

⁸ Oberg 1980, 94. Surely "purposes" is a conceptual cousin of "behavioral objectives," if more vague and perhaps platitudinous than its rougher relative?

⁹ Oberg 1980, 94.

¹⁰ Oberg 1980, 94.

¹¹ Oberg 1980, 94. Here "thinking through" seems like "sounding off."

¹² Oberg 1980, 94.

¹³ Oberg 1980, 95.

¹⁴ Oberg 1980, 96.

¹⁵ Oberg 1980, 96.

¹⁶ Oberg 1980, 96.

¹⁷ Oberg 1980, 96.

¹⁸ Oberg 1980, 96.

¹⁹ Oberg 1980, 97.

²⁰ Oberg 1980, 97.