1

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

It is difficult to attempt to address all the possible meanings of the term 'objectives' at once. On the one hand, there are the objectives of policymakers for the education system itself; on the other, there are the more specific learning objectives that teachers and students might be working to in particular lessons or sequences of lessons. Some layers of meaning, such as the overtly political, are addressed in other chapters. This chapter attempts to confine its discussion to learning objectives, and to identify some of the issues surrounding these. It questions, however, whether these issues can be divorced from political issues about power, relationships and control, particularly in a situation where the specific learning objectives are seen as the means at a national level of bringing about fundamental change within and around the education system.

The new interest of UK governments in education exists on at least two levels. Firstly, there is the large policy agenda of how the education system is to be brought under public (or governmental) control. At this level the concern is with accountability for expenditure, and with changing the relationship between society and its education professionals to create direct lines of accountability. Secondly, there is concern about the nature of what is taught and

how this might be influencing society in relation to the wishes of policymakers. These two areas are interrelated in the increasing intervention in curriculum content by the Government since 1988 – intervention heralded by Callaghan's Labour Government in 1976. Governmental involvement, both with the broad canvas of the education system and with the details of its curriculum have taken the form of curricular prescriptions based upon specified objectives and learning outcomes. Such objectives are to provide the means by which education gives an account of itself, through measurement of how far objectives have been met. They also provide the tool for government intervention – at a very detailed level – in the content of curriculum. Besieged by measurement and with curriculum prescriptions arriving (and changing) at a rapid rate, the work of teachers is very significantly constrained by objectives used in this way, and thus a fundamental change in the 'professional' role is signalled in detailed prescription at the level of learning objectives.

All this has been imposed upon the education – and training – systems, without any historical evolution. The 'objectives movement' has had limited impact in the UK prior to governmental prescription in the National Curriculum. Its attraction for government is as a way of bringing about rapid and measurable change – a means of management of education.

In England and Wales there are four major curriculum innovations – each shaped by assessment through objectives – which illustrate a dramatic and historically unprepared shift in educational practice in this country. GCSE assessment objectives, National Curriculum attainment targets and statements of attainment, student profiling and the Units and Elements of competence of the NVQs are at the centre of current educational change. Each of them, in ways which will be explored further in later chapters, is based upon objectives.

In order to explore the question of curriculum objectives it may be helpful first to consider them in their oppositional light, as alternatives to other organizing principles for curriculum and learning, and further to consider what value positions are inherent in either the 'objectives movement' or its alternatives. In other words, the attempt here is to explore what is at stake in adopting or rejecting particular objectives models of education.

Objectives as the alternative to rote learning

This is perhaps the most clearly 'educational' context in which the objectives debate may be considered. The tenacity of content-laden curricula and rote-learning is a well-established educational concern, and the search for alternative principles, though not necessarily called objectives, can be found well before the advent of the National Curriculum. In 1580, Montaigne lamented many aspects of his contemporary pedagogy such as the celebration of bookishness at the expense of application of knowledge. Men 'stamped with the mark of letters,' he says, 'are wonderfully acquainted with Galen, but not at all with the disease of the patient' (Hazlitt 1952, Essay 24: 59). He argued for education that recognized the many contexts of learning, even during what appeared to be play, and for expectations in the evaluation of learning that went beyond mere repetition: 'Tis a sign of crudity and indigestion to disgorge what we eat in the same condition it was swallowed' (Essay 25: 65).

Herbert Spencer's discussion of the desirable emphases of learning may be credited with marking the beginning of the modern debate about educational goals. It maps a method of progression in teaching, from concrete to abstract, and questions the assumption that the rules and principles of a subject are the appropriate starting points for learning: rather these principles should be 'disclosed, as they are in the order of nature, through the study of cases' (Spencer 1861: 30). He favoured a rational curriculum, based upon decisions about 'the relative values of knowledges' (1861: 7) and a classification of the activities of human life.

Dewey stressed the need for aims in education, and made a number of distinctions which still have important resonance. An aim, he advocated, is not merely a result but is an end, a deliberate and intended goal; the aims of educators should be educational aims, not issuing 'from some outside source' (1916: 121); the formulation of aims should take account of 'the present state of experience of pupils' and an aim 'is experimental, and hence growing constantly as it is tested in action'. He introduced the distinction between an aim and an object, the latter being a 'means of directing the activity' (1916: 123).

Despite a long history of curricular discussion, the dominance of

secondary education in the UK by particular models of examination at 16 tended, until the 1980s, to emphasize content. Syllabuses for public examinations were expressed in terms of the topics to be covered, but not in terms of the learning objectives of the course. Many examinations were dependent on timed essays showing recall of factual material. There are plenty of implicit assessment objectives in such examinations – about recall and speed of writing. What was lacking were overt objectives concerned with what was actually to be learned and applied through the ingestion and repetition of content.

The GCSE introduced an objectives model as an alternative to content-based examination syllabuses which had preceded it. By stressing objectives, it made an important break with the traditions of examining, and opened the way for a wider and more relevant curriculum, and for the identification of underlying cross-curricular objectives. This might be seen as a significant shift and reform in educational practice. Its main impact, however, was upon the two years of secondary schooling prior to public examinations at age 16, the years to which the assessment applied. Nor did GCSE shift the locus of control in education. Although it was at first seen as an unprecedented piece of governmental intervention in the examining systems (previously under the control of university matriculation boards and Local Education Authority consortia), it gave in practice increased endorsement to a professional model of control, not least through the introduction of coursework assessment as a component of final results. The shift that did occur was from a classical humanist view of knowledge absorption to a liberal humanist view of relevance and the personal meaningfulness of learning. This change posed no threat to professional power overall, though it may have altered the balance of power within the teaching profession.

Objectives as alternatives to liberal humanist consensus

Liberal humanism rests on the fundamental assumption 'that human nature is universally and eternally the same' and is closely identified with the traditions of western education, traditions which may no longer answer 'the legitimate needs of the modern

world' (Durkheim 1977 [1938]: 321). Liberal humanism proceeds on assumptions of consensus and tradition and can be seen as ill equipped to address the problems of modern societies. It is embedded in the 'habitus' of education which may be at the roots of its reproduction of existing social order (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970) and hence can be accused of perpetuating inequality of access and achievement.

There are a number of ways in which liberal humanism may be challenged through the stating of curricular objectives:

Objectives and the logic of production

The systematization of the curriculum mapped by Bobbitt (1918, 1924) took its inspiration from industrial processes and began a trend not only towards utilitarianism but also towards increasing specificity and proliferation of objectives. It is from the manufacturing terminology of Bobbitt that the terms process and product have passed from the factory to the school, becoming in later discussion of objectives associated with enabling objectives (the process) and terminal objectives (the product).

Objectives and a science of education

Tyler's rational model of curriculum planning (Tyler 1949) restored a level of generality to the notion of objectives. His model of curriculum planning depends on goals, content, methods and evaluation, and offers a model within which identification of more specific goals of content and method can be decided at the level of the institution or the teacher. The model is essentially that advocated for School Development Planning (Hargreaves and Hopkins 1991: 5) with the added emphasis that planning is cyclical not linear, and that the evaluation stage also informs decisions about purposes. It also bears relation to the personal target-setting and review processes of the National Record of Achievement. While Tyler offers a rational model for looking at educational planning which can be adapted to a number of levels of planning – personal, institutional and beyond – he recognized the filters through which the decisions about goals must pass. There need to be philosophical judgements, and interpretations of learners' needs, as well as attention to the needs of society. These filters are, in

Tyler's view, provided by professional judgement – so what Tyler offered is a way of acting systematically within a framework that was still in practice dominated by liberal consensus.

The work of Bloom and his associates (1956) placed objectives in the context of a theory of cognitive development and is based upon classification. Their taxonomy of objectives does not claim a hierarchy as such, but does give the areas a ranking in so far as each successive stage is seen as a prerequisite for the next, so that knowledge precedes understanding and understanding precedes application of understanding and evaluative analysis. Bloom and co-workers attempted to illustrate how this model could be applied to various established disciplines (academic subject disciplines). What was proposed was something of a science of cognitive education. Their contention of general principles governing the cognitive learning across subject areas is, however, problematic, and perhaps underplays the essentially different nature of different academic disciplines. 'Synthesis' for example (dependent according to Bloom on knowledge and understanding) may occur in written composition without explicit 'knowledge' of the kinds listed in the taxonomy (Wilkinson *et al.* 1980: 48). Very young children can synthesize simple events into a story long before their comprehension skills are particularly well developed. Questions arise as to whether across different subject areas the categorizations truly represent the same degree of complexity, a 'circumplex', with variations only in content (Seddon 1978). Despite the detractions from this attempt at a categorization of learning goals, the taxonomy has provided an anchor for a number of research projects into examinations and assessment in the UK (Willmott and Hall 1975; Biggs and Collis 1982; Pollitt *et al.* 1985). Likewise, the knowledge, understanding, application and evaluation framework is that adopted, in different degrees, by GCSE subjects 1986–93, but not by the National Curriculum planners.

The taxonomy of the affective domain (1964) is, as Bloom and co-workers acknowledge, entering an even more problematic area than the cognitive, and one which is far less readily susceptible to assessment (Eisner 1985; Aspin 1986). Like the behavioural approaches which depended upon such classifications, the taxonomers may divorce educational activity from moral contexts:

> Bloom misses the opportunity to introduce the necessary

> 'logical' considerations into his classification of objectives in the affective domain. He acknowledges frequently enough that 'at all levels of the affective domain, affective objectives have a cognitive component' but he fails to see that this cognitive component (the 'judgement', or 'the way someone "sees" the object of feeling') is the crucial factor in determining whether an affective response is desirable or not . . . Otherwise we are left with questions like 'commitment to what?'
> (Gribble 1970: 14–15)

Technocracy and meritocracy – the behavioural objectives alternative to liberal traditions

Behaviourism, deriving from the work of Pavlov and Skinner, and advocated by Mager (1962) as a basis for designing instruction, offered what seemed a new and more rigorous approach to the processes of teaching and learning. If objectives were expressed only in terms of 'observable behaviours' then programmes of instruction could be designed which would be based upon logical sequences of learning and the readiness of each learner to pass forward could be ascertained without subjective judgement about unseen mental processes, but by reference to the actual observed evidence of learning. A behavioural objective should specify the conditions in which the behaviour is to be demonstrated and the criteria for successful fulfilment. Mager (1962) provided a manual of how to construct such objectives. Gagne (1965) developed an elaborated theory of learning hierarchies and task analysis of prerequisite skills and concepts for a given learning outcome. The role of the teacher becomes one of task analysis and ensuring mastery of prerequisite steps in learning. Computers can, in theory, play a very effective part in such models of learning. If each task can be analysed into common paths that all learners will take, the computer program would be better able to provide that structure while ensuring an individualized pace of learning than the teacher. In this way behavioural approaches seem to offer a highly rational, planned approach to learning. Mastery learning places great emphasis on individual pace of instruction. Computer-based instruction removes the problem of a teacher being unable to give sustained, individual attention to 20 or 30 pupils. The technical approach removes the high degree of (teacher) subjectivity in decisions about the style of teaching and

the relationships established – which may or may not be beneficial to learning. The classroom becomes a more scientific environment in which personality clashes and alternative value systems are – supposedly – eliminated by the carefully controlled focus on planned learning pathways and outcomes.

The behavioural objectives movement has been open to a number of critiques. It supplants important questions about what should be taught and why, with questions only about task analysis and ordering of instruction. It also raises problems about the level of a behavioural objective and how far each task has to be analysed for the model to provide support to instruction. Eva Baker points out that merely following the formula of a behavioural objective does not in itself 'present sufficient cues regarding what a teacher should alter in instruction'. The example adduced is: 'Given a lyric poem, the student will be able to write a 450-word essay on the theme and tone' (Baker 1976: 11).

Chanan (1974) addresses the difficulties of setting objectives in the humanities, and concludes that the greatest difficulty lies in those objectives that are tacit because they are embedded in the value systems of our society. These exemplify the implicit objectives of education. Emergent objectives (i.e. those which are not pre-specified but are identified during a process) are almost a defining characteristic of creativity. Eisner (1985) distinguishes between expressive and instructional objectives. Moreover, 'the assumption that objects [objectives] can be used as standards by which to measure achievement fails, I think, to distinguish adequately between the application of a standard and the making of a judgement' (Eisner 1985: 91).

Specific objectives, particularly in their association with behaviourism, appear to present a reductive and mechanistic view of the complex processes of human learning. Behaviourism is a development in some ways from the movements outlined above which sought to associate education with industrial process, or to apply the principles of science to curriculum planning.

However, it is perhaps too easy to forget the Utopian aspirations of the technicist vision. A life governed by rationality can be proposed as an alternative to existing social orders in which patronage and privilege are rarely subject to scientific, rational challenge. The all powerful individuality of the teacher is channelled into a rational analysis of specific learning tasks. Assessment is focused

on specific tasks rather than clouded by generalized views of 'ability'. Viewed from this perspective, measurable objectives represent an attempt to alter the basis of control in education: to reduce the social, personal and social class features of education and to systematize it in such a way as to remove these interference factors. It is in this sense parallel to other attempts to make education more accessible to greater numbers, by removing some of the traditional, consensual and hence unspecified customs of the classroom, school or system. It makes the curriculum explicit and hence open to scrutiny.

However, there are problems about the larger structural messages of technocracy. It implies obedience, orderliness and rationality, and could be seen as a means to produce a subdued population. It cannot be assumed that the governmental attraction to objectives is located in a meritocratic reorganization of society. It may be that the larger technocratic messages are attractive to holders of power, along with the reduced (and replaceable) role of teachers in a technicist curriculum model.

United Kingdom contexts

The Schools Council research in curriculum development came increasingly to associate itself with school-based development and with action research by teachers. Stenhouse advocated a process model in opposition to the objectives model for thinking about curriculum: 'The improvement of teaching is not the linear process of the pursuit of obvious goals. It is about the growth of understanding and skill of teachers which constitutes their resource in meeting new situations . . .' (Stenhouse *et al.* 1980: 244).

Her Majesty's Inspectors of education (HMI) were working throughout the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s on more explicit and comprehensive curriculum guidance. Their work on this was published in a series of so-called 'Red Books'. The Red Books sought to establish a very broad framework: 'We believe that there are general goals appropriate for all pupils, which have to be translated into curricular objectives in terms of subjects/disciplines/areas of learning activity.' They suggest that diversity in organization in secondary schools could be mitigated by more national agreement about these objectives (DES 1977: 5).