

THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE LEARNING SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines English society in the context of lifelong learning and the learning society. It looks at the historical, social, economic, and political perspectives. It identifies a limited learning society – 13-15 percent of the population within which the extent of lifelong learning is variable.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to discuss the characteristics of English society, to provide evidence for the existence of a learning society, and to discuss the extent of this type of learning society. Several reports have suggested the emergence of a learning society. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE)(1997) defines a learning society as one in which everyone recognises the need to continue in education and training throughout her or his working life. This definition of a learning society, as used in this paper, is one in which formal education and training is the main focus. The Fryer Report (1997), the Green Paper 'The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain' (Department of Education and Employment (DFEE) 1998) and The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) Gallup Survey 1996 (Sargant et al., 1997) subscribe to this definition of a learning society. Of course, there are other forms of learning – non-institutionalised and non-qualification based learning. However, these are outside the scope of this paper. Lifelong learning, in this paper, will mainly be concerned with learning at post-compulsory education and beyond. Evidence relating specifically to England is used whenever possible, failing which, evidence of the United Kingdom is used instead.

Historical, social, economic and political perspectives of English society

England comprises 84% of the UK's population and occupies 54% of the UK's area. The economic activity and the gross domestic product (GDP) per head (1996) are the highest of the four countries in the UK (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 1999c).

After nearly three hundred years of the United Kingdom, Scotland and Wales have regained their political independence, while Northern Ireland, with its fragile era of peace, cautiously follows suit. As a result of devolution, the question 'What is it to be English?' is being assessed with fresh urgency.

The historical perspective in the context of education in England is illuminating because it serves to identify one of the chief characteristics of English society: voluntarism – defined as the freedom to think and act individually. England and Wales have the same education system. The Act of Union of 1536 between these two countries made Wales subject to English law. Equally, Ireland has had a similar education system to England since the Act of Union in 1800 between Ireland and England. Even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this voluntary approach was already visible. There was no compulsory attendance in schools, and they suffered little interference from the state.

The Bryce Commission of 1895 enthused about the "freedom, variety and elasticity" of the English education system (Green, 1997). This voluntary approach was achieved because of the early formation of the British nation state and the lack of foreign invasions since 1066. I think that this may also have created a tolerance towards eccentrics in which individuals are allowed to express their own individualities. This individualism fosters a creative society. The break from Rome and the founding of the Church of England also gave England its distinctive religious freedom. The rise of naval power together with the acquisition of colonies gave England its freedom to determine its own course, unlike its continental counterparts (Davies, 1997).

Within the present century, the Conservative victory of 1979 resulted in partial reversal of this centuries-old voluntary approach. The Conservative governments brought in a national curriculum at the school level in 1988. This had to be scaled down. The independent sector did not partake in this exercise. Part of this was a purging of a perceived weakness in British culture – state monopolies and state socialism (Green, 1997). Instead, the 'Victorian' values of private enterprise, individual responsibility, and thrift were promoted.

English society is still entrenched in the class system. The enclosure movement in the eighteenth

century provided a divide between the landowners and the rest of society. Despite the apparent breakdown of the class structure after two world wars, it has persisted in subtler form. The high divorce rates, the rise in the number of single parents, the Calvinistic attitude towards employment and the relentless pace of technological innovations and global communications have created a stressful and less community-oriented society. Yet, the citizens of this country enjoy a relatively large degree of freedom. England is still widely perceived as tolerant, and eccentrics are part of the milieu of this society, as evident in the artistic and cultural activities.

The English economy does not present a completely negative picture. The UK is part of the Group 8 (a group of the eight most economically influential countries). The GDP of England (GDP per capita x total population of England (49.3 m)) is the eighth largest of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations (OECD, 1998). The standard of living is higher than ever before. The London stock exchange is the third largest in the world. The City of London boasts the largest concentration of overseas banks in the world.

In political terms, the UK is entering an interesting phase: the process of devolution is now a reality with Wales and Scotland having their own parliaments. The dawn of a peaceful political landscape within Northern Ireland can be seen as one of the major achievements of this government. The subject of Englishness is now reassessed with more vigour than ever, by writers like Julian Barnes, Norman Davies, and Jeremy Paxman. The political change from the New Right administration to a social democratic government is in line with continental countries like France and Germany. The pendulum now rests in the middle of the political spectrum with the three major English political parties jostling for distinction. The genteel and bloodless revision of the second chamber in Westminster will have reverberations in the class structure and, ultimately, affect the monarchy itself.

Discussion and evidence of a learning society in England

What evidence is there to prove the existence of such a society as defined in the introduction? The evidence might take the form of the basic skills levels, participation in continuous learning (education and training), university level of education, earnings and the level of qualification, and the extent of creativity in England.

Moser in his report 'Improving literacy and numeracy: A fresh start' (DFEE, 1999b) identified that nearly one in five adults had low literacy skills i.e., below National Vocational Qualification Level 1. Britain performed badly in the 1997 International Adult Literacy Survey. This survey of twelve countries highlighted that Britain had a real problem in this basic skill. It had the third highest percentage of adults with literacy and numeracy skills at the lowest level. USA came fourth – just below Britain.

The NIACE Gallup Survey 1996 (Sargant et al., 1997) found that the members of social class AB are 2.7 times more likely to be involved in current learning compared to those from the social class DE. Social class definition is based on occupation. This system of classification gives five categories. Categories A and B consist of professional and managerial, and technical occupations respectively. Category C is skilled occupations that include non-manual and manual. Categories D and E consist of partly skilled, and unskilled occupations respectively. An exact reversal applies to those not participating in formal learning since leaving full-time education. Those in social class DE are 2.7 times more likely not to take part in learning since leaving full-time education compared to those in social class AB. An updated survey of 1999 suggests that there are no overall changes in the participation rates compared to the 1996 survey. Social class is still a major determinant of learning chances. The length of initial education also makes a significant difference. Similarly, the workplace remains the major site of learning, and the main reasons given for learning are work-related for half of all learners (Tuckett, 1999). The 1999 NIACE Survey indicates that the learning gap has widened between the social classes AB and DE from the 1996 and 1999 surveys. It is difficult to ascertain the reasons for this trend. Key factors might be peer pressure towards employment in social classes DE, and the perception of study as a middle class phenomenon.

There are considerable differences in the social class structure of both genders of working age in the UK (ONS, 1999b). Men are more likely than women to be in the professional and skilled manual class i.e., A and C2 respectively.

Women are more likely than men to be in the skilled non-manual class (C1), which consists of clerical and secretarial jobs. The participation rates in higher education by social class from the ONS (1999b) data reinforces the trend indicated in the above NIACE surveys. Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) and the government (DFEE, 1998) see a higher education qualification as a major step towards a learning society.

Since 1992, the higher education sector has expanded enormously. However, as shown above, the trend is dissimilar for the different social class groups. Even allowing for the possible error in the methodology applied in arriving at the percentages, in percentage growth terms, the increase in participation rates of the unskilled group is 133% from 1991/92 to 1997/98. For the professional group, it shows a corresponding increase of only 45% over the same period. However, in actual percentage terms, 80% of those in the professional class have a higher education qualification and only 14% of those in the unskilled class for the year 1997/98. A qualifier to this set of data is that the percentages apply to those who are 21 or under and not to all ages.

A different source – the OECD Education Database – gives a broader picture in terms of age groups. It illustrates the percentage of the population that has attained a specific level of education, by age group (OECD, 1998). The percentages range from 12% to 15% in 1996 for the age groups 25-64, 25-34, 35-44 and 45-54 for the UK. The UK ranks in the top 10 out of 34 countries listed. One has to bear in mind the differences in classification of tertiary education in these countries and the problems of equating the levels of higher education programs due to dissimilar duration of study, etc. The United States has the highest percentage of those educated to at least university level. Of the EEC nations, only Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands achieve a consistently higher percentage for the age groups specified above. The massification of the higher education sector in the UK from 1992 has still to work through into the age groups starting at 25. The statistics from the distribution of the population and of the labour force for 25 to 64 years of age by level of education attainment (1996) (OECD 1998), indicates that for 1996, the 13 percent of the UK population, and 15 percent of the labour force of the UK, are educated to university level.

Assuming that the premise by Dearing and the government of a higher education being central to the formation of a learning society, is true, then the above evidence points to these conclusions. First, the more one studies, the more likely one is to continue studying (in formal education or training). Second, there is greater chance of one continuing learning if one is employed. This is even greater if one is a professional. Third, social class is a powerful determinant of continuous learning. Fourth, the indicative percentage range of those educated to university level is 13 to 15 percent.

The 13 to 15 percent of the population who are educated to university level are further studied in terms of gross earnings, (using 'Table of the usual gross weekly earnings by highest qualification level

attained and sex – Living in Britain 1995: General Household Survey' (ONS, 1995)). Those, aged 20-69, in full-time employment, are used in this survey. The data indicates that those with a higher level of qualification are more likely to have higher gross weekly earnings than those with a lower level of qualification. A later survey from the ONS (1999a), Family Spending 1997-98 and the 1995 General Household Survey confirms the general pattern.

One could argue that it is the ability of the individuals to express their uniqueness as a result of a relatively free and voluntary society, which has enabled England to see a renaissance of its arts and culture. The UK is a major player in the world market in the following creative sectors: advertising, architecture, art and antiques, computer games, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, music, performing arts, publishing, software, and television and radio. They constitute over £50 billion turnover per year and contribute almost 4% of GDP (Smith, 1998).

The above evidence points to the existence of a learning society as defined by Dearing (NCIHE, 1997), the government (DFEE, 1998) and others. Its members have a high level of formal education i.e., university level, and a habit of lifetime learning. However, this group partaking in the learning society ranges at most from 13 to 15 per cent of the population.

Extent of lifelong learning in England

This section examines the various types of learning to ascertain the extent to which lifelong learning is featured. First, we look at vocational education and training in England. This area of learning, traditionally, does not have the prestigious image compared to its academic counterpart. As a result of this second-class image, vocational education and training has lacked coherent planning and organisation (Ball, 1992; Green, 1997). The previous administration attempted to reform this form of learning but to no avail. The participation rates in post-compulsory education and training lag behind other continental countries (Green & Steedman, 1996). The two authors attributed this poor performance to the voluntary approach discussed earlier in this paper. The first annual inspection report by the Training Standards Council (TSC), a body set by this government, reveals that the picture has not changed. England is still behind Germany and Singapore in terms of a highly skilled workforce at level 3 and above. The exceptional sectors are in horseracing, on-the-job engineering training, and catering training (Kingston, 1999). However, there are signs that the present government is trying to improve the demand, using the New Deal and other initiatives together with

measures to enhance the supply side i.e., available employment in industry. This 'joined-up' approach will be viewed with interest.

The second of the Dearing reports, entitled *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* (Dearing, 1996) plumped for a pluralist, three-pathway framework to post-compulsory education. This retains the academic and vocational divide in contrast to other, comparable, European countries. This approach is viewed as voluntaristic in nature and promotes freedom of choice. The system, however, creates a tension between a 'conservative' approach in retaining the academic rigour of the General Certificate of Secondary Education Advanced (GCSE 'A') level, and a 'reformist' approach that is a response to pressures to be more flexible, efficient, and attainment-orientated (Young, 1997). The major criticism levied at 'A' level is the narrowness of this pathway in terms of the early age at which the student has to decide. Despite some minor adjustments to this academic pathway such as the introduction of key skills, and an additional starred grade to strengthen it, the post-compulsory education landscape has not altered.

The recent White Paper *'Learning to Succeed'* (DFEE, 1999a) testified to this entrenched attitude. This is still the major route to higher education taken by those coming out of schools, and 'A' levels are relied upon by prospective employers. What is new is the establishment of a Learning and Skills Council for England (at local and national levels) to improve standards and bring greater coherence to post-16 education and training, and lifelong learning for adult learners. Also new, is the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) which will be responsible for planning arrangements for learning and skills at national and local levels. The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) will now have responsibility for inspection of this sector. A Connexions strategy will be proposed to increase the participation rate for young people in education and training. New initiatives like 'bargaining for skills' will hopefully encourage greater participation from local businesses. The regional and local structure is reminiscent of the Fryer Report (1997). The emphasis on partnerships and co-operation is a refreshing departure from the New Right days. There appears to be a more coherent and integrated service for unemployed people linking Employment Service, the New Deal, and the new ONE service for benefit claimants. But, the main ethos of this White Paper is still the maintenance of the three pathways – General Certificate of Secondary Education Advanced (GCSE 'A') levels, General National Vocational Qualifications, and National Vocational Qualifications. The GCSE 'A' level pathway is still the main feeder to 'the learning society' as defined in the NCIHE Report (1997). Another is still the

voluntary approach towards education and training on one hand, and the jobs market on the other.

Internationally, the UK performance in the university-level qualifications is above the OECD country mean in natural sciences, mathematics and computer sciences, and humanities/general subject categories. In mathematics and computer sciences, it shared equal place with Finland for the highest percentage. However, in engineering and architecture, law and business and medical science subject categories, the UK performance is below the OECD country mean (OECD, 1998). This survey comprised 29 countries. The UK's above-average performance in computer sciences, humanities, and natural sciences could be a contributory factor to the creativity in diverse sectors ranging from computer software development to the arts.

The citizen advisory group, chaired by Professor Bernard Crick, with the backing of David Blunkett, the Minister for Education, is considering introducing compulsory teaching of citizenship at schools. Many schools have existing citizenship programs. These programs are supposed to enhance pupils' participation and motivation, and can lead to community-spirited behaviour, according to some evidence (Crick, 1999). Of course, citizenship programs are well established in Asian countries like Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea (Green, 1997). I suspect one argument for the incorporation of citizenship studies into the curriculum is to act as a counterweight to the UK society's over emphasis on individualism, freedom, and the reliance on the welfare state.

A report by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) entitled *'All our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education'* looks into ways of promoting the creative development of pupils (NACCCE, 1999). It suggests that creativity will become increasingly important to businesses and the economy in this century. At the higher education level, there are various projects to investigate the development of creativity skills; at places like the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine; the University of Northumbria; and the University of Westminster. This report, covering lifetime learning, is innovative and holistic in its approach.

I would like to consider the final type of learning, which I call 'life-skills'. This comprises awareness of health (including education on drugs), nutrition, parenting, finance, and the environment. However, the delivery and uptake of these topics will have to be carefully considered. Most school students in England already receive formal sex education and, despite this, this nation has a higher proportion of teenage mothers per head of population than any

other country in the European Union. Additionally, Belsky & Kelly (1994) in the USA, studied the lack of awareness of the implications of parenting. They found that societal factors contribute to this ignorance.

On a positive note, more people are becoming aware of the issues about pollution and the environment, genetically modified foods, and organic foods. This growing awareness largely arises from national media coverage of these topics and the publicity generated by pressure groups like Greenpeace and the Soil Association. The extent of such informal 'learning' is difficult to ascertain but it gives food for thought for the compulsory education sector.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the historical and economic perspectives of England reveals some characteristics of the English nation state. They include the emphasis on individualism, freedom for its citizens, a tolerance towards other cultures, a healthy scepticism, a voluntary approach, and a Calvinist attitude to work. However, England should not be viewed as unique or distinct from Europe. After all, it was Baroness Thatcher who acknowledged our links with the Continent of Europe in her speech at Bruges in 1988. For almost four centuries, this island was governed from Rome. Over the centuries, the kings of England were also kings of France. Dutch and German kings have ruled this country (Colley, 1999).

The identification of a learning society in England centred on the section of society which has a university education and the purchasing power to pursue cultural, leisure, and lifetime learning activities. This section of the community is identified as between 13 to 15 per cent. The picture of lifelong learning in England is mixed.

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