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MATTHEW ARNOLD AND MINIMUM COMPETENCY: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITISH EXPERIENCE WITH NATIONAL BASIC SKILLS ASSESSMENT.

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Let me sketch for you a true scenario:-

The government of the day, elected on the promise of massive tax cuts, decides that it is its duty to look at one of the major charges on the public purse, and to "take the calmest and most dispassionate review of the existing system of education."¹ It appoints an official investigative commission, which reports that of all "the children in the schools . . . only one fourth are taught thoroughly well to read, write and cipher."² The responsible government members concur in the commission's judgment that "the bulk of the children who pass through the schools are inefficiently instructed."³ As the educational system has expanded and become more socially inclusive, standards have fallen, but, the government avers, "the true principle is not to lower your standards to meet cases which are at present below it, but to do what you can to induce them to amend themselves."⁴ The increase over recent decades in expenditure on teacher education and equipment has been largely irrelevant to the basic problems in the schools, the government decides; "all the instructive books, all the excellent maps, all the ingenious apparatus, if not absolutely wasted, are, indeed, far too costly and cumbrous for the service in which they are engaged, and about as proportionate to its requirements as a pack of artillery for the dispersion of a flock of sparrows."⁵ Although the teachers are rapidly becoming a vested interest almost beyond any political control, the government concludes that "till something like a real examination is introduced [examining the children "child by child" in every school at stated intervals] . . . , good elementary teaching will never be given to half the children who attend."⁶ One government supporter argues that their aim is not to "fix the maximum

but the minimum of instruction . . . if you expect to receive the aid and countenance of the state, you must teach reading, writing and arithmetic, and teach them well,"⁷ and even though all examination and testing is currently the subject of heated political controversy, the senior government education spokesman is certain that "in reading, writing, and arithmetic, a test of proficiency may be contrived."⁸ In spite of the direst warnings from school-teachers, and in spite of rumblings from some politicians that basic skills testing could disrupt the important work of social control and education being accomplished in the schools, and in spite of the protests of educational theorists and administrators and local school trustees, the new program of testing is put into effect, and the consequences for good and ill are felt in the schools for a full thirty or more years.

The situation, the analysis, the solution, and even, as we shall see, many of the particular controversies and objections, in this educational scenario, sound terribly familiar; yet the programme I have been describing, and all the spokesmen I have been quoting, were not from the America of the nineteen-eighties, but from Britain, and British Parliamentary debates, in 1862, when the then-Liberal government introduced a Revised Code for allocating educational finance.

England and Wales had not yet, in 1861, got a national elementary educational system, but the government had, since 1833, distributed capitation grants, based on average attendance, to approved privately-founded schools run by religious denominations and educational charities. Since 1846, also, they had paid special grants to augment the salaries of properly trained teachers; had given scholarships to pupil-teachers in the secondary age-range to encourage them to enter the teaching profession; and had given direct grants to the various education colleges, to expand and develop their faculty and curricula.⁹ The fiscal commitment of the central government had risen steadily, from £20,000 in 1833, to some £800,000 a year in 1861, an increase of four thousand per cent, even though government grants were only

intended to supplement school income from fees and local fundraising.¹⁰ Because of this growing and open-ended fiscal commitment, the shocking findings of the Newcastle Commission that less than half of British children attended an approved elementary school regularly, and that only a quarter of those reached a satisfactory educational level, made imperative some government action. As Robert Lowe, the Vice-President of the Council, and so responsible for educational policy, said in the House of Commons: "we have not started this difficulty; it has been forced upon us."¹¹

Lowe's answer, the Revised Code, was based on the since-notorious principle of "payment by results;" "we propose," he announced, just too late to allow Parliamentary debate that session, "to give no grant for the attendance of children at school unless they can read, write and cipher."¹² Along with this, he wished to sweep away all the supplementary grants that had been made for teacher education, because he saw a large part of the problem as caused by teachers wanting, for reasons of professional ambition, to diversify the curriculum beyond the pressing and immediate basic needs of their elementary pupils. For political reasons, he had eventually to compromise on both of these major aims: the "revised Revised Code" of 1862 split the capitation allowance in two, with one part paid on the old basis of mere attendance, and the other on the new basis of demonstrated competence, while the education colleges came through shaken but essentially unscathed. His principal objective, however, of introducing the regular testing of each individual pupil, became government policy, and even though it was modified in its detailed administration incessantly, his Code made the framework in which British educators worked till 1897.

Robert Lowe has conventionally been painted by educational historians as a mean-minded anti-educational villain, whose Scrooge-like system set back British schooling by a full generation, and distorted elementary curricula for much longer than that.¹³ Indeed, the immediate result of

the Revised Code was to cut government expenditure on elementary education by nearly 25% over the next four years, even though school attendance was rising by nearly 20% in the same period.¹⁴ Schools and schoolteachers were, for the first few years, substantially worse off under the fiscal provisions of the new policy. If, however, we are really to learn the lessons of educational history, we must, I think, acknowledge the professional bias of most of those who write it. It is true, as Lowe's critics would point out, that a large part of the political support that Lowe was able to put together for his Code rested on its fiscal promises; the government had won election on the promise of abolishing all income tax, and Lowe told the Commons of his scheme, "if it is not efficient, it shall be cheap."¹⁵ It is also true, as some recent Marxist interpreters have asserted, that there was a ~~class~~ component to support for the Code; some upper-class representatives argued that elementary schools should be discouraged from educating working-class children, like Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield or Jude the Obscure, above the level they would need for their future life.¹⁶ Even from a conventional educational point of view, however, it is at least arguable that it was only through the new fiscal responsibility that Lowe introduced that later programmes of educational expansion became politically feasible. Yet the heart of Lowe's proposals was educational, not merely fiscal or political, and with revived public interest in basic skills assessment, it is the educational implications of the Revised Code that now deserve closer analysis than they have usually received from the educational-historical demonologists.

An objective source on these implications is in fact very hard to come by, for in the nature of things no comparable testing statistics survive from before the introduction of the new Code to act as a base for judging post-1862 results. I want to draw renewed attention to one source of a different kind, the writings of a participant-observer in the changes, and a man who had worked the older grant system, was deeply involved in the

implementation of the new Code, both immediately and over the next twenty or more years, and yet a man who has a stature as a social analyst and commentator that goes far beyond narrowly educational matters. I refer, of course, to the poet and critic Matthew Arnold, who served as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, for nearly thirty-five years, from 1851 to 1886.¹⁷

In spite of his official position, Arnold had been deeply committed against Lowe's reforms in the controversies of 1862, and wrote a number of ^{splendidly scornful} anonymous articles on the question, the best-known of which became his pamphlet, The Twice-Revised Code, a strong personal attack on Lowe, his nominal chief.¹⁸

At the end of his career, he wrote a retrospective essay on "Schools in the Reign of Queen Victoria," and concluded that "no serious and well-informed student of education will approve the Revised Code."¹⁹ But in addition to such general public rhodomontades, Arnold as an H.M.I. had also to produce an annual report to the Privy Council, printed in the Parliamentary Papers, based on his inspectional visits the preceding year; these reports are much less well-known, and have been rather unaccountably omitted from the recent multivolume Michigan edition of Arnold's Complete Prose Works.²⁰

These reports take a much more balanced view of the Code - for instance, Arnold wrote in the Report for 1869 that "no one questions the advantage of an individual grant-rewarded examination, or that the Newcastle Commissioners did well in suggesting it, or that the Education Department did well in giving effect to this suggestion" (1869, p.132).²¹ Arnold was, in fact, when writing for the general public, an awful attitudinizer, and ~~the~~ *the task of* ~~refracting~~ facing up to real tasks and real issues in his official writing actually seems to have improved his writing style; ~~one~~ *one* fastidious critic of Victorian belles-lettrism has ~~written~~ written, "I don't know that, even as literature, one would willingly forgo [Arnold's] reports on elementary schools for the sake of another" of his later poems.²² His

official reports, unlike his more flippantly dismissive periodical essays on the topic, are practical and serious attempts to assess the real effects of Lowe's new policy.

He saw the Revised Code as causing quite specific changes in the way British elementary schools were being run. One effect he observed was on school organization. There had, before the Code, been an ad hoc amalgam of age and ability-level in the way children were put into school classes. The requirements of the Code that children be examined each year to a progressively more advanced standard meant that, for the examination period at least, the schools had to be regrouped more systematically by ability-level alone (1863, p.92). It became against the schools' interests to risk advancing good pupils through more than one standard in a year (1876, pp.172-3). The exclusive emphasis for grant purposes on four (later six) very basic standards of achievement entailed also the discontinuance in the poorer schools of classes for children who would stay in school for a longer period (1867, p.112). Whatever the intent of merely examining an existing institution, the effect of the new examinations was significantly to alter the institutions they examined.

These organizational changes had their counterparts in the Code's effect on the relatively-recent profession of trained schoolteacher. The position of the elementary schoolteacher was ambiguous both socially and academically, in Victorian Britain.²³ The teachers claimed professional status, went through a long apprenticeship, survived formal examination themselves, and could receive, at quite an early age a salary better than that of the average Victorian clergyman;²⁴ elementary schoolteaching was an avenue of upward social mobility for ambitious Victorian youths from the lower-middle classes, or the labour aristocracy. On the other hand, schoolteachers rarely had any university-level education, or much contact with the traditional literary culture that formed the substance of middle and upper class instruction. In Arnold's view, the introduction of the Code, with its emphasis on basic skills teaching, and its end to the augmentation grants for superior teacher

training, shut off much of the incentive for schoolteachers to improve their general education. They were no longer rewarded for giving higher-level instruction in the evenings to their pupil-teacher apprentices, and Arnold averred that this "sense of a change in the schoolmaster's position" led to "slackness," "discouragement," a "teaching staff . . . less vigorous in spirit . . . more slackly recruited, and with weaker recruits, than it was a few years ago (1867, p.107; cf.1871, pp.145-6). Those teachers who remained ambitious changed their idea of professional development, from general culture to pedagogical methods, where Arnold would have had them studying their Latin and French for the matriculation requirements of London University (1874, pp.164-7).²⁵

A third consequence of the Revised Code was a changed relationship between the Inspectors, such as Arnold, and the schools and schoolteachers they had to examine. Under the pre-1862 system, the Inspector had visited and questioned each class, and had made a formal report on their achievements, but he had acted more in the spirit of an accrediting authority than as an examiner (1863, pp.91-92). Now, the schools viewed him much more as an adversary, and much of his pastoral effectiveness in improving small schools and encouraging isolated and socially-uncertain schoolmasters was lost (1863, pp.93-96).²⁶

Nor did Arnold feel that these changes in school organization, in the morale of schoolteachers, and in the spirit of inspection, had been accompanied by any substantial improvement in competency levels in the schools. Simply in the minimum of education that the Code emphasised, he found that in the first years after the alleged stimulus of annual examination had been introduced, the children in his district were actually doing progressively worse work; "the decline of intellectual life caused by a more mechanical method of instruction," he wrote, "shows itself in increasing weakness in even those very matters which our changes were designed to revive and foster . . . the total rate of failure, which [in 1865] was 11.9%, rose last year to

13% (1867, pp.113-114). But even where the pass rates were improving, he remained convinced that this was the result of superficial cramming, not of real improvement in education; "in the game of mechanical contrivances," he wrote, "the teachers will in the end beat us" (1867, p.115).

Arnold's objections to the Code centred on the consequences he observed on the school curriculum. He argued that focussing on basic skills led to a neglect of the general culture and knowledge which allowed further development. "The circle of the children's reading," he reported, "has . . . been narrowed and impoverished all the year for the sake of a result at the end of it, and the result is an illusion" (1869, p.126). Arnold was not alone in his criticism, nor was the criticism confined to the humanists; one of his inspectorial colleagues lamented that "Government arithmetic will soon be known as a modification of the science peculiar to inspected schools, and remarkable chiefly for its meagreness and sterility" (quoted in 1869, p.128). The schedule of requirements under the Code (Appendix I below) would indeed have made on its own an extraordinarily dreary curriculum, yet the grant system encouraged teachers to make just such a limitation in their curricular planning. Even when in the face of all the objections the Education Department added supplementary examinations for the higher classes in such subjects as history and geography, the result was still that teachers tried to cram their pupils with just that minimum of information required to obtain the new supplementary grants (1869, p.129).

Some of Arnold's happiest ironies were unleashed as he attacked, year after year, the curricular effects of the Revised Code - the "narrow, unintelligent mode of instruction" it encouraged (1869, p.130), the "narrow range and jejune alimentation in secular literature" that its schools provided (1869, p.130), the "rubbish" that passed for poetry in its reading books (1867, p.121), and the "astonishing crudeness" of culture in the products of the education colleges whom he had to examine for certification

(1876, p.176). Some of these lamentations may be discounted, perhaps, as Arnold's customary intellectual snobbishness, but the observations stemmed also from a deeply-held conviction, tested out over thirty years of school inspection, that individual examination distorted the curriculum, and narrowed the method of instruction to "an intricate and mechanical routine" (1867, p.115).²⁷ "Of course," he concluded in his last formal report, "a great deal of the work in elementary schools must necessarily be of a mechanical kind," but it should be balanced always by "the sense of pleasurable activity and of creation" (1882, p.228).

It would be absurd to claim that Arnold's strictures on the Revised Code constitute an inclusive or impartial evaluation of the Code's consequences. Arnold was by background and education and social class and temperament a man to whom any kind of mass educational system would seem rather second-rate; his whole cultural experience was different from that of the poor and provincial schoolchildren and schoolteachers he was inspecting.²⁸ His general reports, from which I have been quoting, were deliberately written to be corrective, not to make fair overall judgments, so much as to "devise remedies for the evils which are bound to follow from the applications" of the Code (1869, p.125). Still, they have the value of direct participation in one of the largest-scale and most thorough-going anticipations of the modern attempt at minimum competency-directed education. The whole episode of Lowe's Revised Code; the reasons for its introduction; and the consequences that an articulate, intelligent, and widely-experienced observer such as Arnold found to have followed from it - these remain strangely haunting and provocative as a new generation of basic skills assessment begins to have its effect on the schools.

Notes

- 1 Robert Lowe, in Commons, Feb.13 1862: Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), 3rd series, 165 (1862), col.195.
- 2 ibid., col.198.
- 3 ibid., col. 242.
- 4 ibid., col.229.
- 5 ibid., col.209 (quoting Mr.Watkins, H.M.I. for Yorkshire).
- 6 ibid., col.206.
- 7 Mr.Leathem, in Commons, March 25 1862: Hansard, 3rd ser., 166 (1862), col.106; cf. Lowe, loc.cit., col.237.
- 8 Lord Granville, in Lords, Feb.13 1862: Hansard, 3rd ser., 165 (1862), col.175.
- 9 See, e.g., W.H.G.Armytage, Four Hundred Years of English Education, 2nd ed. (Cambridge U.P., 1970), pp.119ff.; or H.C.Barnard, A History of English Education From 1760, 2nd ed (London, Univ. of London Press Ltd., 1961), pp.98ff.
- 10 Spencer Walpole, in Commons, March 25 1862: Hansard, 3rd ser., 166 (1862), cols.25-26.
- 11 Lowe, loc.cit., col.242.
- 12 ibid., col.237.
- 13 Vide Armytage, p.125 ("the Pharaoh-like regime of the Revised Code") or Barnard, p.111; but cf. also the revisionist assessment by D.W.Sylvester, Robert Lowe and Education (Cambridge U.P., 1974), esp.ch.5, pp.80-115, on "The Effects of the Revised Code."
- 14 Sylvester, p.82, Table 3, drawing on the Final Report of the Cross Commission (1888).
- 15 Lowe, ibid., col.229.
- 16 Richard Johnson, "Education and Social Control in Early Victorian England," Past and Present, 49 (1970), 96-119; and cf. Spencer Walpole's speech, as in n.10 above, col.30.

17 Arnold's career as a schools inspector is especially well discussed by E.K.Chambers, Matthew Arnold, A Study (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1947), pp.12-23 (perhaps because Sir Edmund was himself a literary civil servant). Cf.also W.F.Connell, The Educational Thought and Influence of Matthew Arnold (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950 ~~an unrevised doctoral dissertation if ever I saw one~~), pp.203-242. There is an extensive ~~if undistinguished~~ literature on Arnold as educational commentator, focussed on his ideas about middle-class education and culture: for a list, see Vincent F. Tollers, A Bibliography of Matthew Arnold (University Park, Pennsylvania State U.P., 1974), items 675-734.

18 Originally published in Fraser's Magazine, 165 (March 1862), 347-65, and reprinted in Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, ed. R.H.Super, II (Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 1962), 212-243; Arnold's other anonymia and pseudonymia on the revised code are in Complete Prose Works, II (1962), 244ff., and IV (1964), 1-7, and to them can now be added "A Few Words About the Education Act," first reprinted by Roger L.Brooks, Modern Philology, 66 (1969), 262-66.

19 Originally in T.H.Ward, ed., The Reign of Queen Victoria, A Survey of Fifty Years (London: Smith, Elder, 1887), II, 238-79; reprinted in Complete Prose Works, XI (1977), 210-245.

20 The reports were first collected by Arnold's colleague Sir Francis Sandford (London, Macmillan, 1889), and then in an expanded edition by F.S.Marvin (London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1908); short selections have also been included in Peter Smith and Geoffrey Summerfield, eds., Matthew Arnold and the Education of the New Order (Cambridge U.P., 1969), and in Gillian Sutherland, ed., Matthew Arnold on Education (Harmondsworth, Penguin Education, 1973). ~~There has been some confusion about the facts of these reports omission from Super's edition, even among Arnold experts (cf. Ierold I.Savery, Arnoldian, 5, Fall 1977, p.10, and John P.Farrell, ibid., p.12).~~

21 Quotations are from Marvin's edition, as in n.20 above, and references to the report year, and page number, are given in parentheses in the text.

22 John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, Weidenfeld, 1969), p.

23 The social ambiguities are well explored by P.A.W.Collins, Dickens and Education (London, Macmillan, 1963), and in his earlier monograph, Dickens and the Trained Schoolmaster

24 Sylvester, as in n.13 above, p.77.

25 Cf. also the comments on this of Thomas Healing, Arnold's assistant inspector in later years, in Sir Joshua Fitch, Thomas and Matthew Arnold and their Influence in English Education (New York, Scribner's, 1897), pp.173-175.

26 Gillian Sutherland, Policy-Making in Elementary Education, 1870-1895

(London, Oxford U.P., 1973) argues convincingly that the inspectors' dislike for the new system was a major factor in its eventual abolition.

²⁷ Cf. Arnold's more general works on education and culture, with their Carlylean opposition to mere machinery, as in Culture and Anarchy (1869) and Friendship's Garland (1871); and also Fred G. Walcott, The Origins of Culture and Anarchy: Matthew Arnold and Popular Education in England (Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970). Lowe himself soon came to the same conclusions as Arnold about the curricular effects of the Code (Sylvester, pp.95-96).

²⁸ For a slashing attack on Arnold (and W.F.Connell) along these lines, see G.H.Bantock, "Matthew Arnold, H.M.I.," Scrutiny, 18 (June 1951), 32-44.

Appendix I: the Schedule of Examination Requirements for Each Standard under the Revised Code, as Amended in 1862 (from Parliamentary [Sessional] Papers, XLI [1862], 164, schedule 48, replacing the four-standard version in PP, XLI [1862], 125).

Cl. 48	Standard I	Standard II	Standard III	Standard IV	Standard V	Standard VI
Reading	Narrative in monosyllables.	One of the Narratives next in order after monosyllables in an elementary reading book used in the school.	A short paragraph from an elementary reading book used in the school.	A short paragraph from a more advanced reading book used in the school.	A few lines of poetry from a more advanced reading book used in the first class of the school.	A short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative.
Writing	Form on blackboard or slate, from dictation, letters, capital and small manuscript.	Copy in manuscript character a line of print.	A sentence from the same paragraph, slowly read once and then dictated in single words.	A sentence slowly dictated once by a few words at a time, from the same book, but not from the paragraph read.	A sentence slowly dictated once by a few words at a time, from a reading book used in the first class of the school.	Another short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative, slowly dictated once by a few words at a time.
Arithmetic	Form on blackboard or slate, from dictation, figures up to 20; name at sight figures up to 20; add and subtract figures up to 10: orally from examples on blackboard.	A sum in simple addition or subtraction and the multiplication table.	A sum in any simple rule as far as short division (inclusive).	A sum in compound rules (money).	A sum in compound rules (common weights and measures).	A sum in practice or bills of parcels.