

# Contemporary Themes in Education Policy

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**Abstract:** *Since the conclusion of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, whilst Northern Ireland is part of the UK, it has had the right to set its education policy independently of its county of origin (O'Connor et al., 2020). As a result, Northern Ireland has a separate Statutory Curriculum for Key Stage 3: Principles and Details. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the educational ideology embodied in KS3 and the globalisation trends of the period corresponding to the policy context. The policy is systematically analysed using theoretical concepts such as Human capital and Social Efficiency to shed further light on the historical and economic context in which KS3 has emerged.*

**Keywords:** Human capital; Social efficiency; KS3; Policy analysis; Learn-centred education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since The Belfast Agreement was concluded in 1998, whilst Northern Ireland is part of the UK, it has had the right to develop its education policy separate from the original county(O'Connor et al., 2020). Therefore, the Statutory Curriculum at Key Stage 3: Rationale and Detail (referred to hereafter as KS3, 2007) was undertaken separately in Northern Ireland. This curriculum policy was developed under the leadership of Northern Ireland's Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA, 2007), which provides a straightforward guidance service for schools and teachers.

This paper aims to critically analyse the educational ideology embodied in KS3 and the globalisation trends in the period corresponding to the policy context. This essay begins with a brief introduction of five educational theories is provided. These theories will then go on to a critical analysis of KS3 is carried out. Next, the dominant educational ideologies in KS3 are summarised. Finally, a further level of analysis is provided regarding the historical and economic context in which KS3 emerged.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Liberal Education

Liberal education, also called scholarly academic theory and academic rationalism, is a teaching philosophy that respects the traditions of the 'discipline' (Stronach and Piper, 2008). There is no unified understanding of this educational philosophy in academia, but its essence lies in two aspects. Firstly, traditional discipline is the essence of liberal education, for instance, Mathematics, English, Fine Arts and Natural Sciences (Godwin, 2015). Secondly, liberal education provides most students with a broad base of disciplines that prepare them for responsible citizenship and the global economy (Scott, 2014; Godwin, 2015). Therefore, liberal education assumes that students are shapeable, and through the transfer of knowledge, teachers can help students acquire intellectual excellence (Newman, 2008).

Nevertheless, liberal education is often accused of being elitist. As O'Hear and Sidwell (2013) criticise liberal education, they argue that this philosophy of education is essentially for the elite rather than the masses. Similarly, Scott (2014) supports O'Hear and Sidwell's (2013) criticism and states that this is the root cause of modern society's disdain for vocational education. Consequently, liberal education is an elite education based on traditional disciplines.

### 2.2 Learner Centred Education

Learner-centred education (LCE) is a philosophy of education that focuses on the 'growth' of children, also referred to as progressive education (Counts, 1932). Although different theorists have interpreted LCE in different ways, for example, Rousseau (2010) emphasised respect for the freedom and nature of children; Dewey's (1998) highlight the relationship between education and democracy. They almost agree on the following two essential features of LCE. Firstly, the emphasis on the needs and interests of children (Schweisfurth, 2013). In other words, the LCE approach emphasises that the learning content is relevant to the learner's life and is a form of experiential

learning (You, 2019). Secondly, the learning process is an interaction between learners and their peers and teachers (Schiro, 2008). The subject of the educational activity is the student, and the facilitator is the teacher. This approach is very different from liberal education, which emphasises a fixed curriculum and the teacher's authority.

However, some critics have argued that LCE is a 'hollow' approach to teaching and learning and that it is difficult to prove its effectiveness. For example, the Summerhill school, founded by Scottish academic E. S. Neill, was based on the LCE approach. Even though parents who supported the school believed that their children developed a range of skills and gained confidence (Neill, 1998), it was forced to close because of its poor performance in official education (Stronach and Piper, 2008). This extreme pedagogical practice proves that the LCE approach may struggle to function on its own in a world of universal compulsory education (Schweisfurth, 2013).

### **2.3 Social Reconstruction**

As with LCE, social reconstruction assumes that education is a way of discovering and reinventing learners, rather than the 'educational banking' that liberal education insists on (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2010). However, social reconstruction is a more radical educational philosophy than LCE (Zuga, 1992). Firstly, critical pedagogy reflects the democratic ideals of teaching and emphasises civic education (Schiro, 2008). More specifically, teachers encourage students to reconstruct society as future citizens, participate in life, and gain a deep understanding of the democratic lifestyle in the teaching process. Secondly, critical pedagogy allows teachers to integrate the dynamics of public life with democracy to address social issues such as the conservation of natural resources through education (Giroux, 2010).

Nevertheless, social reconstruction thought is not a mainstream idea in the existing education system. Because critical teaching encourages students to be openly sceptical about existing intellectual, cultural and political systems to shape a new social order (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2010). Thus, this educational philosophy poses a risk to the existing system (Giroux, 2010).

### **2.4 Social Efficiency**

Unlike LCE, 'social efficiency' emphasises meeting and developing the skills needed by society rather than children's individual needs (Schiro, 2008). Although social efficiency has many manifestations in educational ideology, it is concentrated in two common denominators. Firstly, education fulfils the needs of the state and the community. As Green (1990) argues, building an education system based on social efficiency provides a trained workforce for the state and society. Secondly, the content of the curriculum is chosen for its real-life value and relevance. In other words, young people should be prepared for life and work in school (Snedden, 1900). Therefore, the education system should provide not only traditional subject education but also vocational education.

However, as with other educational philosophies, there has been a certain degree of academic criticism of the idea of social efficiency. Eliot (1904) points out that social efficiency has caused education to become utilitarianism, divorced from its academic attributes. In a similar vein, Knoll (2009) supports that social efficiency may hinder social change. This point seems to be because social efficiency is about maintaining the existing society rather than creating a whole new social order as in 'social reconstruction' (Schiro, 2008).

### **2.5 Human Capital**

Human capital emerged from the economic field and can be traced back to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Sweetland, 1996). Schultz (1971) proposed that the central idea of human capital is that learners invest in themselves through education. More specifically, individuals learn knowledge and skills to increase their productivity, and as such, they expect to receive a certain amount of money in return in the future. Consequently, human capital theory is concerned with the instrumental nature of education, which is in line with the idea of 'social efficiency' (Robeyns, 2006). However, human capital theory is more concerned with the economic benefits of education.

Winkler (1987) doubts whether a degree, generated through investment in education, truly represents an employee's actual abilities. For example, a graduate with a bachelor's degree may be doing the same job as his high school peers (Becker, 1993). Hence, one critique of human capital is an over-focus on the narrow attributes of education. Because the human capital theory does not focus on education contents, such as the curriculum and how it is taught (Schiro, 2008), its focus on the education system is simply a matter of return on investment for the

individual and the state.

In general, these five views of education focus on aim, knowledge, curriculum, child, and to varying degrees (Schiro, 2008). Firstly, liberal education focuses on subject traditions and teacher authority. Secondly, LCE focuses on the interests of students and the partnership of teachers. Thirdly, social reconstruction focuses on re-establishing social order, rooted in dissatisfaction with existing social facts. Fourthly, social efficiency concerns itself with the needs of the state and society. Finally, human capital looks at the economic interests of the individual and the state (society). Therefore, this paper will systematically analyse how these five educational philosophies are reflected in KS3 curriculum policy.

### 3. POLICY ANALYSIS

The KS3 aims to provide developmental opportunities for teenagers, and promote individual, social, economic and environmental development (KS3:4). Cross-curricular themes and key elements are an essential part of achieving this aim (KS3:4). The following section will first analyse the cross-curricular themes in the Northern Ireland curriculum and then focus on the key elements of citizenship and employability.

#### 3.1 Cross-Curriculum Skills

In Northern Ireland, cross-curricular skills include communication skills, the application of mathematical knowledge and the utilization of information technology (ICT) (KS3:11). Firstly, the development of cross-curricular skills requires an education in knowledge-based on separate disciplines, which embodies 'liberal education'. As Godwin (2016) points out, multiple separate disciplines are the essence of liberal education. For cross-curricular skills training in Northern Ireland, specific knowledge and skills need to be taught in different subjects such as English and mathematics (KS3:11). Moreover, liberal education supports education for all without discrimination. In Northern Ireland, education is open to all young people and aims to help them acquire the necessary skills and access to work in the future (KS3:23). This access statement is highly aligned with the requirements of liberal education, as it enables academics to become responsible citizens and prepare for the global economy (Scott, 2014).

Secondly, the cross-curricular competencies that highlight students' personal progress and development reflect the LCE ideology (Schweisfurth, 2013). In terms of the communication skills required, it requires that the whole curriculum is aligned to the developmental level of the student (KS3:25). This means that children of different ages and developmental levels will have a curriculum that is appropriate to their abilities to help them develop their skills. This reflects the importance given to the needs of children at KS3. Secondly, in Northern Ireland the teacher-student relationship is a partnership (KS3:11). In other words, rather than following the traditional 'Socratic pedagogy' of helping pupils to acquire knowledge, teachers choose to promote mutual progress through interaction with pupils (Schiro, 2008). Overall, the LCE philosophy of teaching and learning is well represented in the Northern Ireland curriculum structure.

Finally, this cross-curricular skills training also reflects the concept of social efficiency. This is because the goal of interdisciplinary skills development is to reap influential contributions to social skills and competencies (KS3:11). This is consistent with Green's (1990) assessment of social efficiency, which argues that the education system should meet the needs of the state and society for a workforce. Furthermore, the development of cross-curricular skills is also feedback to real life. As an example in communication skills, KS3 encourages teachers to use various techniques, formats and media to help students become effective communicators (KS3:25). This is because communication effectively is a skill required for the 21st-century workforce (Blackmore and Rahimi, 2019). Consequently, the idea of social efficiency is also fully reflected in the development of interdisciplinary skills.

#### 3.2 Citizenship

Citizenship is the key element of the KS3, reflecting how youth can better understand their situation and improve their own lives and the lives of others (KS3:7).

Firstly, citizenship reflects the Northern Ireland Curriculum reform's focus on social reconstructionist ideas. Specifically, this key element encourages pupils to use democratic approaches to influence social change (KS3:7). As Freire's (1996) critical pedagogy recognizes that the primary goal of education is to promote social change and create a new social order. Consequently, re-establishing this new social order requires students to be actively

involved in their lives, for example, through charitable activities in the community (KS3:7; Freire, 1996).

Moreover, the critical pedagogy encourages students to integrate everyday life with democratic issues, as is also evident in KS3. For instance, KS3 holds that pupils should have the opportunity to engage with diversity and inclusion and social issues such as democracy and justice and human rights (KS3:7). The objective is to help students understand themselves adequately, their communities, and society, thereby improving their quality of life (KS3:7).

Secondly, citizenship's focus on the school and community environment reflects the idea of 'social efficiency'. As mentioned earlier, the social efficiency approach focuses on education to meet the state and the community (Schiro, 2008). Curriculum reform in Northern Ireland, particularly citizenship education, emphasizes strengthening the relationship between pupils, communities and the environment and promoting communities and the environment (KS3:7). It is thus concerned with the public good of society rather than the concentration of individual pupils' interests. In this way, a distinct idea of social efficiency is reflected in the key element of civic awareness.

### **3.3 Employability**

Employability is a key element of the KS3, to enable all youth to become 'effective employees/employers' (KS3:9). On the one hand, KS3 provides young people with multidisciplinary employment knowledge and specialist vocational training to become an effective workforce (KS3:9). Consequently, education provides society with valuable skills and helps it to develop. It reflects the core idea of social efficiency (Knoll, 2009).

On the other hand, these courses provide opportunities to help students gain employability, prepare for 'vocational study', and develop personal talents and interests (KS3:9). So this reflects the LCE idea of focusing on learners' interests and skills and helping them grow (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Secondly, the focus on students' employability skills also reflects the application of human capital theory. KS3 highlights the need for young people to understand and meet employers' expectations and understand the economic interdependence between the various levels of social institutions (KS3:9). In other words, the economic rewards that students can receive for meeting the needs of their employers become the focus of KS3's attention. Furthermore, the ability to respond to the challenges of the 21st century, such as collaborative skills, entrepreneurship and the calculations of the probability of things working out, is reflected in the KS3 (KS3:10). In particular, the willingness to take calculated risks for success is a key skill that human capital emphasises (Schiro, 2008). This is because human capital focuses on education's instrumental nature and considers whether education is worth doing from a rational perspective. Thus, employability embodies the idea of human capital.

Thus far, this section has explained how liberal education, LCE, social reconstruction, social efficiency and human capital are presented in KS3. The next chapter will consider the dominant educational ideologies that are reflected in the Northern Ireland Curriculum reforms.

## **4. BALANCE OF IDEOLOGIES OF EDUCATION**

The dominant ideology in KS3 is the educational ideology of social efficiency and human capital. As stated in KS3, the primary purpose of education is to provide learning opportunities for young people for their own social, economic and environmental development (KS3:4). Moreover, 'the Inclusion of Learning for Life and Work' is also included in The Northern Ireland curriculum (KS3:14). Thus, the holistic aim of KS3 is to contribute to the development of society by providing young people with a range of skills, reflecting the fact that KS3 has social efficiency as its primary pursuit. Furthermore, individuals can gain the necessary employability skills through their curriculum studies, reflecting the human capital philosophy of the KS3 curriculum reform. Overall, the dominant ideology of KS3 is made up of the educational concepts of social efficiency and human capital.

Nevertheless, the social order represented by social reconstruction seems to be on the periphery of curriculum reform at KS3. Because social reconstructionist thinking encourages an awakening of citizenship and a change in the current situation, and therefore only appears within the key elements of citizenship and sustainable development in KS3 (O'Connor et al., 2020). As a result, social reconstruction is an ideology on the periphery of curriculum reform in Northern Ireland.

## 5. POLICY CONTEXT AND CONCLUSION

Curriculum policy is part of public policy and is the programme of policymakers to solve social problems (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). More specifically, policymaking is informed by the operation and interaction of the surrounding socio-political context (Littig and Griessler, 2005). Therefore, the historical events and the socio-political context in which Northern Ireland took place in 2007 are worthy of examination.

The history of Northern Ireland, often considered 'turbulent' and lasting for over forty years (Tanova et al., 2008). They ended in 1998 with the enactment of The Belfast Agreement, which gave Northern Ireland its legislative powers (O'Connor et al., 2020). In this agreement, the values of 'choice', 'equality' and 'inclusion' in Northern Ireland were established and influenced the subsequent development of curriculum reform (Donnelly and Osborne, 2020). KS3, for example, respects the right of young people to freedom of choice and expects them to succeed in worthwhile activities (KS3:4). Thus, the nearly 40 years of unrest in Northern Ireland and the introduction of The Belfast Agreement led to 'respect for the freedom of choice of all learners' to KS3 policy reform.

KS3 curriculum policy development has been influenced by the history of the origin (Northern Ireland) and the UK government's policy of marketisation of education (Donnelly and Osborne, 2005). While it is accepted in the education community that British education policy has had a negligible impact on educational issues in Northern Ireland, Salters and McEwen (1997) make the case that British education policy influences the local education system. Because of the national (England) principle of marketisation of education, whereby education is about helping students succeed in a competitive market economy. This idea of the human capital theory is reflected in local (Northern Ireland) education policy. For example, the emphasis placed on students' employability at KS3 (KS3:9; KS3:10; KS3:14). Thus, KS3 is equally influenced by the UK education market in its policy development process.

Additionally, transnational and supranational organisations have influenced curriculum policy in Northern Ireland. Both the OECD (2005) and the Council of Europe (2004) have suggested that educational institutions need to help students develop a range of skills to meet the challenges of the 21st century, such as critical thinking and independent problem-solving skills. In a similar vein, KS3 (KS3:12; KS3:13) also emphasises these key skills. As a result, the KS3 was influenced by local history, economics and politics, supranational and transnational organisations. It made KS3 a time-sensitive educational policy for policymakers to grapple with social issues (Gallagher et al., 2012, O'Connor et al., 2020).

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