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**Diversity and the Newbolt Report**

**Introduction**

The current iteration of the English National Curriculum (NC) aims to introduce children to ‘the best that has been thought and said’ (DfE 2014: 6) and to allow them the chance to develop, ‘culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually’ (DfE 2013: 2). The NC states that English has a ‘pre-eminent place in education and society’ (2) and recognizes that, ‘Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development which ‘with control over language enables pupils to become fully participating citizens (2). This version of the NC assumes a level of entitlement and accessibility to education across England unhampered by social issues, and it is predicated on a particular understanding of knowledge, strongly influenced by E.D. Hirsch’s ideas about ‘cultural literacy’ and the work of Michael Young (Hirsch 1987; Young 2014). While the political rhetoric around the NC has been couched in terms of social justice (Gove 2014), and it presents the concepts of curriculum and knowledge as neutral objects, the reality is more complex, particularly in today’s diverse, contemporary societies (Doecke 2017; Snapper 2020).

In this chapter I will turn back a hundred years to explore what *Newbolt* suggests about the purpose of English curriculum in the education system, and how it has the potential to lead us towards a more equitable society with a particular emphasis on diversity. The core belief of *Newbolt* was that England was wanting a sense of social unity in the aftermath of World War 1, and that such unity could be embedded through a national education system which placed high quality teaching of English language and English literature at its heart. English would play a special role so that there would be, ‘...a liberal education for all English children whatever their position or occupation in life.’ (Newbolt 1921: 14). This is a relevant and important discussion today, both because of the central importance of *Newbolt* for the evolution of English as a school subject, and also because it was written during a period of history not dissimilar to current times.

*Newbolt* emphasises at least three reasons why English language and literature would be able to achieve this aim. Firstly, because the study of language and literature helps everyone understand human life in the broadest and most profound ways; secondly, because they play central roles in bridging the social divide by sharing a culture; and thirdly, because the English and especially English literature are considered self-evidently 'great'. Such ideas feel problematic today in a country which is grappling with issues of identity from the global and national level, to the individual level. The first and second reasons assume that learners across the social divides will simply accept what they are taught in an unquestioning, shared way and reach the same conclusions; the third reason reduces literatures other than English to a lesser status for no obvious reason, as will be discussed in greater depth. All of this is at odds with how we understand learner behaviour today, and the assumption that there is a single culture to which we all belong is inadequate. Although *Newbolt* has been interpreted in different ways over the years (Perry 2019), there remains a good case for revisiting its vision of English teaching, which far exceeds the current NC. This chapter will begin with a discussion of the social and pedagogical context of *Newbolt*, before exploring how it views the place and purpose of English literature and English language as a means to '[link] together the mental life of all classes by experiences which have hitherto been the privilege of a limited section.' (Newbolt 1921: 15).

### **Diversity in *The Newbolt Report***

*Newbolt* does not deal with diversity or inclusion in the ways that we understand the terms today. It advocates lifelong learning, including extended sections on how English can help both the working class and the middle class in adult life. There are some brief sections specifically focused on education for females, typically decrying the quality of such education, but the default pupil discussed in *Newbolt* is male, white and of British heritage, as evidenced by the continual usage of male pronouns throughout. It is also evident that it is written from a middle class perspective with a middle class audience in mind (Davison 2020). *Newbolt* makes assumptions about general levels of pupils' intelligence, assuming that they are not 'usually regarded as stupid, and incapable of learning,' (Newbolt 1921: 316), although for the less academically able drama, apparently, was seen as an effective pedagogical

approach. There is no mention of race, disability or sexuality despite the fact that English society was more diverse than has often been acknowledged (Cocks & Houlbrook 2006; Olusoga 2016).

The fact that there is little in *Newbolt* that speaks directly to the BAME community or the LGBTQ+ community should not be surprising in the context of the legislative history of the UK. The first Race Relations Act came into force in 1965, and homosexuality was decriminalized two years later, although it was not until 2017 that the final vestiges of anti-homosexual legislation were finally swept away. Many see the Equality Act (2010) as the most significant legislative act in protecting the rights of individuals, even though it is clear that deep inequalities remain across society (Davison 2020).

However, there is a strong focus on social mobility and social justice, and *Newbolt* highlights how English can be taught as a unifying force, although not perhaps in the ways that the authors originally intended. But who were the authors? The members of the Newbolt Committee were clearly of a similar social class, but they were, at least in gender terms, more representative of the population than was often the case with government committees, and they were recognized experts in the field. Six of the fourteen Committee members were women, including school inspectors and professors of literature; by comparison, three of the fifteen members of the contemporary Young Report were women (Young 1920), and four of the twenty-two members of the Hadow Committee were female (Hadow 1926). It is also helpful to understand that other members of Newbolt's Committee were also strongly connected to English education. Sir John Henry Newbolt himself was a well-known poet and Chairman of the English Association; George Sampson was a highly regarded scholar; and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, was a famous Cornish anthologist<sup>1</sup>. These people had a deep personal investment in language and literature. Today it can be difficult to find out who writes government policy, but it is unlikely to be writers or poets.

### **Social and Pedagogical Context**

Originally published in 1921, in a period characterized by the traumas of World War 1, the Spanish influenza pandemic and global political instability, *Newbolt* was

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<sup>1</sup> See Smith, this volume, for a detailed consideration of the membership of Newbolt's committee.

concerned with the potential of English in schools to 'bridge the social chasms which divide us' (Newbolt 1921: 6). The euphoria which followed the end of World War 1 was short-lived, rapidly replaced with a sense of anxiety and a realization that the standing of England and the British Empire was significantly diminished (Blythe 1963). The USA was becoming a significant international power, and the rise of communism following the Russian Revolution was causing major concern. Although the UK played a central role in the outcome of World War 1, it quickly became clear that the Armistice was not going to shepherd in a golden age of peace and prosperity and that the character of England was not as great as some felt before the War.

Society was subject to 'rapidly changing conditions' (Newbolt 1921: 15), and there was much national soul-searching, some of which is reflected in *Newbolt*. The election of a coalition government in 1918 was the first English election in which women were allowed to vote, albeit only women over 30 who had some property rights; parity of voting rights was granted in 1928, although it was not until 1970 that 18-year-olds were allowed the vote. During the 1918 election, Constance Markievicz became the first woman to be elected as an MP, although as a member of Sinn Féin she did not take her seat in the House of Commons.

Educationally and pedagogically, the 1920s was a period of experimentation. Developments such as the introduction of Steiner schools and the work of Caldwell Cook (Cook 1917) aimed to bring a clear sense of creativity and self-expression to teaching in schools. These experiments now seem quite radical, but they were consciously operating in the cultural and scientific environment of their times (Lester 1926). Yet, although such experiments have been described in some depth (Abbs 1982) they were limited in scale; the majority of English teaching continued to follow the traditional models which had been criticised since at least the 1850s (Arnold 1910). This is made clear by government advice such as the conservative *Some Suggestions for the Teaching of English in Secondary Schools in England* (BoE 1924) and the fact that the Board of Education itself was turning down funding requests for such projects in the 1920s (Bolton 2007), which should not be surprising in the economic context of the times (Geddes 1921; Burrows & Cobbin 2009). Other advice for teachers at the time focused on traditional approaches to grammar and literature, the latter being treated almost as an extension of history (Blyton 1926).

*Newbolt* assumes that English society in the post-war years was strongly stratified in social terms. The problems caused by the differences in education between the social classes were seen to be unhelpful for moral and ideological reasons, and there was a sense of danger in the air, most famously and dramatically noted in this context by committee member George Sampson:

Deny to working-class children any common share in the immaterial, and presently they will grow into men who demand with menaces a communism of the material. (Sampson 1925: xv)

Commentators have pointed to Sampson's ideas as being representative of a view that the working classes could in some way be kept in their place by reading literature (Eagleton 1983/2008: 22), but this is a limited interpretation of both Sampson's ideas and the ideas proposed in *Newbolt* (Doecke 2017). The Report is centrally concerned with 'the mental distance between classes in England,' noting that 'a system of education which disunites social classes cannot be held worthy of the name of a national culture' (Newbolt 1921: 6). The authors of *Newbolt* wanted to use English in schools to 'bridge, if not close, this chasm of separation' (6), which is clear from the following passage:

the present advantage of rich over poor in our schools – the difficulty of the attempt to pass up the intellectual ladder and to attain the spiritual freedom conferred by a real education – is keenly and rightly felt as an unnecessary and unjust inequality. Nothing would, in our belief, conduce more to the unity and harmony of the nation than a public policy directed to the provision of equal intellectual opportunities for all. (Newbolt 1921: 25-26)

## **Literature**

Recognising the centrality of English language and literature as school subjects central to the broader purpose of education, which they describe as 'guidance in the

acquiring of experience' (Newbolt 1921: 8), The Committee believed that literature had a particularly important role to play, and:

...must never be thought of or represented as an ornament, an excrescence, a mere pastime or an accomplishment; above all it must never be treated as a field of mental exercise remote from ordinary life. (Newbolt 1921: 9)

*Newbolt* repeatedly stressed the idea that literature should play a central role in every learner's education because it was seen to be 'the most direct and lasting communication of experience by man to men.' (9) Yet the ways in which literature is emphasised have, rightly, been criticized. *Newbolt* is unequivocal in its belief in the superiority of English literature:

To every child in this country, there is one language with which he must necessarily be familiar and by that, and by that alone, he has the power of drawing directly from one of the great literatures of the world. Moreover, if we explore the course of English literature, if we consider from what sources its stream has sprung, by what tributaries it has been fed, and with how rich and full a current it has come down to us, we shall see that it has other advantages not to be found elsewhere...The flood of diverse human experience which it brings down to our own life is in no sense or degree foreign to us, but has become the native experience of men of our own race and culture. (Newbolt 1921: 13-14)

This passage, with its overblown language, has the jingoistic tone identified by Eagleton (1983/2008), and has been taken as a statement of the superiority of a type of Standard English Literature, the type which is highlighted by the current NC. Such a view is not helped when we read:

In any case, no Englishman competent to judge doubts that our literature ranks among the two or three greatest in the world; or that it

is quite arguable that, if not perhaps the finest, it is the richest of all.  
(Newbolt 1921: 200)

That *Newbolt* is convinced of the cultural superiority of a type of English literature is not in doubt, and such views can make us 'cringe'<sup>2</sup>.

Such a view, however, overlooks an equally important part of The Committee's views towards the use of *contemporary* literature in education; they are clear that all learners should read literature, 'which presents the student with experience of time and circumstance more nearly related to his own.' (Newbolt 1921: 18). Such a view of the importance of contemporary literature for education is stated more boldly later when discussing ways to introduce adult learners to literature: 'To begin by throwing the classics of English literature at their heads is generally to court failure.' (276), which has the voice of an experienced teacher. *Newbolt* not only advocates the teaching of contemporary literature as a kind of gentle introduction to more serious, classic literature. It also argues for the active study of contemporary and local literatures to preserve regional and local cultures, which in effect begins to recognize the social and cultural diversity of the country. While it uses examples of Yorkshire dialect poetry and songs, it is not difficult to see how a contemporary rewriting of *Newbolt* might use grime music or Multicultural London English as today's examples.

Further support for the teaching of contemporary literature is found when discussing how teachers should be trained:

...we should like to see some definite recognition of the study of contemporary literature. No living author is named in the Syllabus...but we think that the students are far more likely to perceive in literature not merely a school subject but the most direct communication of experience of man to men if they are encouraged to find out how the life of their own time has been interpreted by contemporary writers.  
(Newbolt 1921: 186)

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<sup>2</sup> Green, p. 1 this volume

This is a different approach to the current NC which claims to focus on 'our rich and varied literary heritage' (DfE 2013), when it actually focuses on a very narrow type of English Literature. Quite who the 'our' is in this statement is unclear, and the 'literary heritage' referred to is not representative of literature which reflects contemporary society (Yandell 2017; Snapper 2020).

## **Language**

*Newbolt*, then, highlights the importance of literature for bridging the social chasm and acknowledging a degree of cultural diversity, but what about English language in the education system? It suggests that every child should develop a command of Standard English, first through speech, then through writing and finally through reading (Newbolt 1921: 19). It states several reasons for the explicit learning and teaching of language skills and echoes can be heard in subsequent models of English including Dixon (1967) and Cox (1991). There is a clear cross-curricular element whereby control of English was seen to allow wider 'educational development' (Newbolt 1921: 10); this is echoed in some depth when discussing the 'adult needs' of the workplace where a command of Standard English was seen to be an increasingly important necessity as more people took on management roles in an industrial society. Here we can see that the impetus for learning language skills was effectively rooted in the desire to enfranchise the younger generations so that they could take up their rightful places in society; I will return to the idea of a 'rightful place' later.

Considerations of the acquisition of language skills are amongst the most controversial sections of *Newbolt* and feel outdated in light of research findings over the last century. The Committee notes that:

...among the vast mass of the population, it is certain that if a child is not learning good English he is learning bad English, and probably bad habits of thought; and some of the mischief done may never afterwards be undone. (Newbolt 1921: 10)

And it clearly states that, 'English is not merely the medium of our thought, it is the very stuff and process of it. It is itself the English mind, the element in which we live



and work.’ (20). The conflation of mind, language and society, particularly regarding spoken language, is placed in terms of social justice a little later:

If the teaching of language were properly and universally provided for, the difference between educated and uneducated speech, which at present causes so much prejudice and difficulty of intercourse on both sides, would gradually disappear. (22)

This could be taken to indicate that *Newbolt* has the vision of a type of English monoculture which dismisses cultural diversity, but this is not in fact the case, as noted above. It appears that the authors anticipated potential criticisms of their views on Standard English:

We do not, however, suggest that the suppression of dialect should be aimed at, but that children who speak a dialect should, as often happens, become bi-lingual, speaking standard English too. (67)

The idea that speaking more than one dialect makes a learner ‘bi-lingual’ is simply wrong and dismissive of dialects other than Standard English.<sup>3</sup> However, The Committee firmly places the acquisition of Standard English as a means to social mobility:

We do not advocate the teaching of standard English on any grounds of social ‘superiority’ but because it is manifestly desirable that all English people should be capable of speaking so as to be fully intelligible to each other and because inability to speak standard English is in practice a serious handicap in many ways. (67)

This adopts a pragmatic approach to learning control over language use which few would dismiss. Many of the witnesses called to give evidence for *Newbolt* express the need for the contemporary workforce to be able to use clear English, a view which still holds today (Mohamed 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> See Cushing & Pye, this volume.

While *Newbolt* is not entirely convincing in its attitude towards the superiority of Standard English, the authors are clear that dialect should not be suppressed, and they are committed to the study of local dialect and literatures which they see to be, 'in the highest interests of English culture' (Newbolt 1921: 145). This suggests a view of social diversity in *Newbolt* which is easy to overlook and which sits in stark contrast to the current NC, which does not even include dialect as a subject of study (DfE 2013).

## **Conclusion**

What, then, are the lessons which can be learnt from *Newbolt* regarding the teaching of English in contemporary, diverse communities? The most significant lesson concerns the use of contemporary literature in education. While *Newbolt* can be criticized for a focus on the assumed superiority of English literature, it is easy to overlook the importance given to contemporary literature. Contemporary literature was not simply viewed as a type of 'gateway literature', softening up younger readers or the working classes so that they might be more amenable to the serious stuff. Rather, it was viewed as a significant part of English culture, worthy of study in its own right. This is very different to today's NC and its emphasis on 'our rich and varied literary heritage', especially in the later years of secondary education. Although there are some signs that confident schools are beginning to use a greater range of contemporary literature in their lessons in Key Stage Three (Smith 2020; Perry, in press), the NC does not go out of its way to encourage young people to engage with literature which might allow them, 'to find out how the life of their own time has been interpreted by contemporary writers.' (Newbolt 1921: 186). Such an opportunity would enable teachers and learners to engage with literature which actually helps them make sense of their own worlds; it would become 'guidance in the acquiring of experience' (8). *Newbolt* is centrally concerned with social unity, but not at the expense of local diversity; such a view is not present in the NC, and it would be a stronger, more educative document if it were.

The view of contemporary literature contained in *Newbolt* is echoed in the authors' attitudes towards language. Although they are clear about the imperative for children to learn Standard English, both in spoken and written forms, the purpose of this is to improve the chances of social unity. The authors of The Report were very

clear about the importance of dialect for cultural reasons, and they viewed this as worthy of study, especially as children moved through the education system. As with contemporary literature, this is largely absent from the NC. It is not that there is anything inherently wrong with Standard English, but the NC would be stronger if it recognized the worth of other dialects as well.

*Newbolt* can be justly criticized on several fronts as discussed above. It assumes a particular social position, and it also assumes that social status is largely static. Although it calls for social unity, it does not assume that social mobility is achievable or even desirable. But the authors did believe in the potential of English education to bridge the social chasm and it recognized the power and potential of English education as a means for young people to understand the rapidly changing world around them, equipping them with necessary skills for life. It achieved this in a more visionary way than the NC, even if the language and some of the attitudes sit uneasily in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For those who are concerned with how a vision of English education which could support young people to develop a greater appreciation of the diversity of human life, including in their own communities, *Newbolt* is a good place to start.

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