

## The Dichotomy of Liberal Versus Vocational Education: Some Basic Conceptual Geography

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### TO DISTINGUISH OR TO BLUR

Despite the fact that hardly anyone since Socrates has seriously held that it is possible to settle interesting philosophical problems by establishing strict definitions, the drawing of significant conceptual *distinctions* is arguably still the main stock-in-trade of professional philosophers. The trouble is, however, that since conceptual distinctions are apt to atrophy in the form of dualisms on the one hand, or are liable to generate problem cases on the other, it is also not uncommon to encounter attitudes of some distrust and hostility among philosophers towards distinction making. While in contemporary mainstream philosophy, the day-to-day business of fine distinction-making continues unabated among philosophers, it is also true that numerous traditional distinctions, enshrining what many have come to regard as unacceptable dualisms, have come under heavy fire in recent times.

One particularly good example of this philosophical iconoclasm is the assault mounted by philosophers broadly located in the pragmatist tradition on the empiricist distinction between the *analytic* and the *synthetic* -- a distinction nowadays commonly denounced as useless for any significant practical philosophical purpose.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is also possible to argue, as other contemporary philosophers have shown,<sup>2</sup> that it is not that the analytic-synthetic distinction serves no real philosophical purpose but that its purpose has been obscured by the failure of past philosophers to separate it from other quite different distinctions -- between the *necessary* and the *contingent*, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, and so on. From this perspective, the real problem might well be not that a distinction has been drawn for no good purpose, but that insufficient distinctions have been drawn in circumstances where there are actually grounds for several.

The arguments of this paper rest on the conviction that there are in fact closely parallel instances in the sphere of educational philosophy and that the common distinction between liberal and vocational learning is a particularly good case in point. Indeed, the distinction between the liberal and the vocational was considerably reinforced in the heyday of analytical philosophy of education when educational philosophers such as Richard Peters and Israel Scheffler first applied the tools of conceptual analysis to the confusions and muddles of educational discourse and distinction making was very much the order of the day. Many of those distinctions and the dualisms to which they gave rise, however, have lately come under serious attack from those who follow in the pragmatist and deeply anti-dualist tradition of John Dewey and, unsurprisingly, the distinction between liberal and vocational education has been a principal target. But, whilst it is possible to sympathize with the sentiments underlying these criticisms, I wish to explore here some reasons for believing that they might be misplaced.

One problem of major theoretical and practical proportions which continues to dog educational theorists and policy makers is that of curriculum differentiation. Essentially this is the difficulty of devising an appropriate content for education -- a program of variously valued knowledge and skills -- which is apt for distribution over a given population of learners heterogeneous with regard to individual differences of ability, aptitude, interest, values, aspirations, social circumstance, cultural

background and so forth. In particular, of course, this is a pressing problem for state-maintained systems of schooling which are charged -- in the name of some overall conception of social justice -- with providing something like a common and equal educational experience for all.

The problem usually surfaces at two main levels -- at the level of individual needs and at that of social requirements. First, then, the problem may be seen as one of what it is right and proper to do in terms of the best educational interests of the individual. On the one hand, it seems *prima facie* fair that all children should be afforded opportunity of access to all the recognized benefits of education and unfair that any child should be denied exposure to any part of what is generally acknowledged to be of educational value; on the other hand, however, it also seems unfair that some children should be required to persist in the learning of that for which they have little taste or aptitude -- and it seems, on evidence, that the academically oriented curriculum of traditional liberal education affords not inconsiderable difficulties for the many non-academically minded citizens of most human societies.

But, secondly, the problem also has economic, social and political dimensions in the context of state maintained education since it is rightly supposed that schooling exists not merely for the benefit of the individual but also for the common good; thus, it may well seem of importance to provide students with precisely those learning experiences which will best equip them for the occupational lives they are destined to lead after school. From this perspective, however unfair it may appear to limit the academic experience of certain non-academically inclined children, it is clearly wasteful of national and social resources -- as well as against their personal inclinations -- to require their initiation into academic disciplines which do not interest them to the exclusion of practical and vocational subjects which do and which also contribute to meeting the urgent needs of industry, service and commerce. All this adds up to the problem of whether we should provide the same sort of educational experience for all or a different sort of educational experience for each with regard to some such distinction as that between liberal and vocational education.

#### A PLETHORA OF DISTINCTIONS

It would be tedious to recount the full history of this issue and the various strategies which have been suggested over the course of two millennia<sup>3</sup> to address it. Historically, it probably assumes urgent significance during the nineteenth century in debates in Britain and other western European cultures about the character and content of mass popular education -- precisely in the light of explicit attempts by philosophers and social theorists to formulate a distinction between academic or liberal education and vocational preparation.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the issue loomed large in relation to the elaborate psychometric program of the first half of the twentieth century which culminated in the U.K. in the separate provision of different kinds of education for allegedly different intellectual categories of children on the basis of academic selection at eleven years of age.<sup>5</sup> However, analogues of the liberal-vocational distinction invariably bedevil debates surrounding educational policy making in most developed societies. They continue to turn up, for example, in the interminable wrangles between conservatives and elitists, who are invariably sympathetic to alternative schooling and curricula for different sorts of children, and liberals and egalitarians who argue, on the basis of this or that notion of justice, for a common curriculum as the right of everyone.<sup>6</sup>

However, the very fact that the debates and issues in question are liable to be characterized in a wide variety of ways, considered alongside the generally unilluminating nature of their outcomes, should alert us to the possibility that perhaps rather *different* questions are at issue here, so that the way to wisdom regarding the true problem might lie through distinguishing more clearly what the relevant questions are. From this point of view, Richard Pring, in a number of important recent publications,<sup>7</sup> gets off to an excellent start in his own treatment of these issues both by way of his general perception of the urgent need for some basic conceptual geography in this area and in his recognition that a substantial amount of confusion may have been engendered by the illegitimate

conflation of a set of rather *different* distinctions. These include, for example, education and training, theory and practice, the academic and the vocational and what is of intrinsic rather than instrumental value. However, it is disappointing that having insightfully recognized the pressing need for better conceptual geography in this area, Professor Pring seems, by and large, inclined to a strategy of soft-pedaling these distinctions rather than taking them as seriously as I believe he should.

Indeed, the strategy to which Pring seems inclined is the more familiar one of denouncing these distinctions in favor of some kind of pragmatic reconciliation or resolution of them. Indeed, he directly invokes the authority of John Dewey, that great archenemy of philosophical dualisms, in this connection.<sup>8</sup> We are thus invited to recognize that the problems engendered by the liberal-vocational dichotomy may disappear if only we can come to see that theory is implicit in intelligent practice, that training can also be educational, that vocational activities can be pursued for their own sake, and so on. But whilst all this may well be true it can also be doubted whether any significant dualism *is* resolved by these considerations -- apart, that is, from the illegitimate one which follows from the wrongful conflation of different and separate distinctions; indeed, Pring is himself forced to fall back on a serious use of the distinctions in order to make the points that vocational training *can* be educational, theory *can* be inherent in practice and so forth.

For the truth is that the distinctions which Pring and others seem to want to blur in the interests of resolving awkward philosophical or educational dualisms have significant implications for our understanding of the function of schooling in relation to the proper educational and other development of young people. As such, they are not so easily disposed of by this casual sleight of hand. Hence, although it may be true that vocational training *can* be pursued for its own sake, it is also important to recognize that there are other non-instrumentally valuable goals which have negligible vocational implications and to which we rightly feel that *all* children should have access. And whilst it may be true that practical learning is at least as important for many purposes as academic learning it is also arguable that at the heart of *education* lie certain forms of understanding which are in an important sense inherently theoretical or academic to the significant exclusion of the practical.

#### EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING

I want to approach the liberal-vocational dichotomy rather differently, by firmly putting asunder what Pring and others show a strong inclination to conjoin. I believe that a useful way into this issue is to recognize that these different distinctions can serve a range of significant conceptual purposes, and that the proper task is to explore the implications for a coherent account of education and schooling of the complex ways in which they overlap and interrelate. When the matter is addressed in this way what emerges is a more fine-grained picture of the relationship between education and schooling and of the function and purpose of the latter in relation to individual and social flourishing than seems hitherto to have been recognized. Moreover, while there are all sorts of philosophical, political and practical reasons why people may be reluctant to embrace this more complex picture there can be little doubt that much error and confusion inevitably follows from a failure to do so.

One manifestation of this confusion in much contemporary discussion of these issues is, I find, exhibited in a not uncommon use of the expression "practical education".<sup>9</sup> But, we may ask, what sense are we to make of this phrase? In fact, it would appear to be blatantly equivocal between the idea of an education which takes the practical aspects of knowledge acquisition seriously -- learning science more by doing experiments perhaps than taking notes -- and that of learning practical or vocational activities in a way which focuses more on the understanding of principles than on the acquisition of skills. It is clear, however, that although these two interpretations are, in practice, quite compatible, they can function in quite different ways and on opposite sides in arguments between those who assert the primacy of liberal education and those who regard vocational training as the most important role of formal schooling.

The former interpretation, of course, construes the practical aspects of learning an academic discipline as only a *means* to understanding it more effectively and it is quite compatible with observing a sharp distinction between education and vocational training. The second interpretation, however, sees education as available just *as much* through practical and vocational pursuits as through traditional academic disciplines and is compatible with the view that for some children vocational learning may provide a legitimate alternative to or substitute for the learning of traditional subjects. However, this seriously confuses the issue to the extent that it suggests this improved conception of vocationalism might for some children count as an education which is in some substantial sense the equivalent of what their more academic peers will be getting through the traditional educational disciplines. For no matter how principled one might try to make an initiation into hairdressing skills it is patently disingenuous to suggest that this might provide some sort of educational substitute for disinterested non-vocational development of a young person's understanding of his own culture and traditions.

The principal failure here, of course, is to distinguish between two quite different issues and considerations -- that of whether we are properly providing children with the right sort of *education* and that of whether we are properly preparing young people for a life of work beyond school. This issue is confused on a well nigh cosmic scale in arguments between what one might call *instrumentalists* and *non-instrumentalists* about the nature of education and schooling; the former claim that the main purpose of schooling (which they regard as synonymous with education) is to prepare young people for the adult life of post-school work and social relationships and the latter insist that education (which they regard as synonymous with schooling) is exclusively concerned with the initiation of children into those intrinsically valuable forms of knowledge which can assist them to understand their own personal, cultural or universal predicament.

The proper way out of this impasse, of course, is to recognize that although the instrumentalist is largely right to assert what he does of schooling and the non-instrumentalist is quite correct about education; both of them would be quite wrong if they put matters the other way around. In short it would *not* be true to say that education is primarily about equipping young people with life skills or that schooling is exclusively about the initiation of individuals into a personal understanding of themselves and the world for its own sake. In short, the instrumentalist confuses education with schooling and the non-instrumentalist confuses schooling with education. If we clearly recognize, however, that schooling (which is a social institution) and education (which is not) are conceptually separate (albeit practically related) enterprises and that education is only *one* of the many purposes of schooling then we may come to see that the problem is not so much of seeing how vocationalism might be made educational or education vocationalized but of how to do justice to both education *and* vocational training within a coherent overall conception of the diverse purposes of institutionalized schooling.

#### MORE ON DISTINCTIONS AND DUALISMS

To acknowledge that in relation to the school curriculum there is room for the claims of both instrumentalists and non-instrumentalists is essentially to recognize that it is proper for people to require quite different benefits from the experience of schooling and that there are therefore quite different reasons for including various subjects and activities in the conventional state curriculum. Thus, one can hardly deny that human agents do require both theory and practice for the successful pursuit of their projects; they do engage in activities and pursuits for their own sake as well as for instrumental reasons; and they require, in the interests of a more general education, some initiation into a personal appreciation of what is worth living for as well as some of the vocationally useful skills which might assist them to earn their living. These distinctions are by no means identical, as Pring himself observes, but it is precisely on this account that each of them is necessary for a clear understanding of education and schooling; they interrelate and cut across each other in markedly different ways in diverse curriculum subjects and activities and they serve to identify the various purposes for which different activities are standardly included in school curricula.

I cannot here undertake the important and philosophically urgent task of exploring in full detail the precise educational significance of each of these distinctions and of tracing the exact pattern of their many interesting interrelationships. However, I am inclined to think that although R. S. Peters is arguably the most culpable of modern educational philosophers and theorists with regard to his own quite blatant conflation of all the distinctions under consideration, his work nonetheless provides a useful starting point for thinking clearly about the general logical geography of this area.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, there are certain regrettable dualist tendencies in Peters's thought -- clearly apparent in his exclusive identification of education with intellectual reflection, his denial that practice has much to contribute to a principled understanding of the world, and that practices have anything more than instrumental value, and so forth -- which call for proper philosophical resistance; but we should not let this obscure our view of certain significant insights at the heart of his account.

Thus, while in the course of recognizing that education concerns the acquisition of knowledge and understanding we need to remember that knowledge has its practical as well as theoretical aspects, we may also be wise to bear in mind that not all sorts of knowledge are centrally implicated in educational development. As Peters argued, education concerns the acquisition of the sort of knowledge which is capable of affording a broad intellectual and explanatory perspective on the world and one's place in it, rather than the mere know how of practical skills. Of course, practice may indeed serve or contribute to the promotion of such explanation and understanding in precisely the way that scientific experiment can contribute to scientific knowledge or the movements of the dancer express the meaning of the dance; but the practical skills of experiment or dance are by no means self-explanatory and it is not hard to see how they might well be acquired in the absence of real understanding. Again, various sports and games may well be performed only for their own sake if that means for no other purpose than the sheer enjoyment of them, but this certainly does not mean that they are educational ends in themselves in the way that history or science are; for whereas rational reflection on nature or inquiry into the human past are well nigh paradigm cases of what it means to have one's understanding of the world substantially enlarged, it is less plausible to claim that hockey or netball contribute comparably to any educated appreciation of the human natural, cultural or social predicament.

This is certainly not an attempt to downgrade the non-educational aspects of human development or to argue that practices and skills of negligible educational significance have no legitimate place in the school curriculum. For although such practices and skills may have little to contribute to the educational development of an individual (however much their performance may entail the grasp of practical rational principles) they may yet play an indispensable part in schooling with regard to programs of vocational training, so-called leisure education and elsewhere. What should be apparent from all this, of course, is that although any human activity or enterprise whatsoever can be viewed as having theoretical *and* practical aspects, as amenable to study in *either* academic *or* vocational terms or as pursuable for its own sake *or* as a means to an end, it is above all crucial to see why, in the light of these distinctions and some coherent conception of the aims of schooling and education, a range of diverse school subjects have traditionally been included in the school curriculum.

What seldom seems to be done with regard to so-called curriculum theory, however, is precisely to consider the various possible reasons for teaching this or that subject in its particularity rather than as part of some general story about what school subjects ought to be contributing to the educational or other development of pupils. Hence, the familiar non-instrumentalist account of the school curriculum canvassed by the new liberal educational philosophers of the sixties tended to assume, or was often taken to assume, that for a subject to be worthy of curricular inclusion it must be shown to have genuine educational value.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, some subsequent officially prescribed curricula would seem to imply that for a subject to be considered worthwhile, it must be susceptible to instrumental justification by reference to various extrinsic economic, social or political benefits.<sup>12</sup>

Generally, I want to argue that the route to more light than heat regarding the liberal-vocational debate lies neither through the construction of largely rhetorical arguments in favor of one side or the other nor through some deliberate blurring of significant differences between the two. Instead what is needed is more attention to what particular school subjects or forms of knowledge have in their quite distinctive ways to contribute to the human development of young people, consistent with ensuring that their due entitlement to education *and* various forms of training is not unfairly unequal where it should be equal or unfairly equal where it need not be so.

To start with, in response to vocationalist skepticism about the value of academic subjects we could ask whether we might ever decently propose that we should dispense in the context of schooling -- at least in the case of some children -- with their substantial initiation into the sorts of activities which non-instrumentalists argue to be of intrinsic educational value, such as science, history, literature, art and mathematics. These, of course, are precisely the forms of knowledge and understanding which liberal educationalists insist that no one should be denied access to if they are to become civilized and rational members of society. Put thus, however, it should be clear from what has been said so far that we are here faced with several categories of educational activity rather than just one. As regards history and literature, for example, we are clearly dealing with activities which have genuine intrinsic value from an educational point of view but practically negligible utility or instrumental value. I take it, however, that despite this -- indeed, precisely on account of the crucial contribution that history and literature have to make to the education of civilized sensibilities -- most reflective people would wish to maintain that in general the more children know about history and literature, to the best of their abilities, the better.

When it comes to the various forms of scientific study, of course, we are faced with activities which have *both* educational and instrumental value in view of their contribution to our understanding of the natural circumstances of human life *and* their obvious technological implications for and applications to a wide range of problems which may also have vocational import for the future of many children in schools. For various reasons we cannot fully explore here, however, it is arguable that substantial scientific understanding is not as crucial as substantial understanding of history for the development of an educated appreciation of their cultural identity on the part of *all* children, and so a proper strategy might be to go for a minimum of general science for everyone and more vocationally oriented specialist programs of pure and applied science for those whose particular abilities and interests take them in that direction.

What, then, should we say of mathematical education? Non-instrumentalists, of course, make much of the intrinsic educational value of mathematics and of its being concerned with considerably more than the promotion of mere numeracy. But again we should beware of assuming that because it is possible to make sense of mathematics as an intrinsically worthwhile form of human understanding it is thereby appropriate to teach it as such to *all* children; for if mathematics is also an activity for which a certain natural flair or ability is required -- as has often been maintained -- then it may well be that mathematical *education* can never be a realistic option, as it would be hard to claim of history, for those who lack the necessary intellectual requirements. In that case we may have to accept that it is no more realistic to entertain any substantial degree of mathematical understanding as a valid goal of educational development for all children than it is to entertain musical appreciation and performance as educational goals for those on whom nature has bestowed a so-called tin ear. But to recognize that a serious conceptual understanding of mathematics is beyond the reach of very many children is quite consistent with endorsing a strong instrumentalist line on the importance of a thorough school training for all in basic mathematical skills on the common sense grounds that basic numeracy is an urgent requirement for the day to day practical purposes of all members of society.

What has already been said in relation to music would also seem to apply to painting and dance and to many other arts for which a particular flair is required; whilst there is room here for an initiation into the basics, particularly at the primary level, it would seem that a freedom to choose according to ability or interests should enter the picture fairly soon at the secondary stage of education. A

distinction which might be of considerable significance here, of course, is that between appreciation and participation in these art forms since it would appear to make sense to try to promote appreciation on a rather wider scale than training in the actual skills of performance. Once again, however, it seems possible to conclude on the basis of common experience that whilst there are considerations and circumstances of physical or other kinds which might interfere with a person's appreciation of either music or painting there are also no arguments here of the sort to which we might appeal on behalf of the indispensable educational benefits of literature for requiring the exposure of *all* children to other fine arts.

It is also likely that there are no compelling educational grounds for requiring the initiation of children into certain physical sports and games -- although there may be valid reasons, if these are empirically sustainable, for including such activities in the school curriculum on the extrinsic grounds of their potential for the promotion of health and fitness. But arguments based on the alleged value of such activities for the development of moral, spiritual or aesthetic understanding or appreciation are at best highly contested and more than likely simply confused.

We should also say a little, to conclude this very truncated survey of the content of the conventional school curriculum, about the value of a whole range of kinds of knowledge and skill of a primarily instrumental nature -- domestic, craft, and technical skills of various kinds. Here again, the relevant distinction may well be between the basic skills of everyday coping such as elementary home economics, computing or woodworking, to which it is reasonable to introduce *everyone* to some degree, and such higher specialist vocational competencies as electronic engineering or commercial and business skills which may be relevant only to those who wish to pursue eventual careers in such areas.

To be sure, each of these observations stands in need of considerably more by way of detailed and substantial argument; my main point is that the overall tendency of the argument should not be in the direction of some general ideological defense of *either* liberal education *or* vocational preparation *or* of some dubious resolution of the two, but towards a better recognition and appreciation of what the various distinctions which underlie what some have seen as an unacceptable dualism have to reveal about the structure and complexity of human needs and interests and the capacity and potential of both schooling and education to satisfy them. Young people do not need secretarial skills or business studies *instead* of history or biology; in at least some cases (but not all) they require *both*. Again, they may not need electronics if they have no wish to pursue a technological career and it may not be necessary to require their initiation into the conceptual complexities of mathematical understanding if they have no recognizable aptitude for it. On the other hand they do require the skills of numeracy even if they have trouble mastering them and some substantial knowledge and appreciation of history, geography and literature irrespective of whether they have any real taste for such studies.

My argument has been, then, that a serious exploration of the conceptual geography of the various distinctions which underlie the vexed dichotomy of liberal versus vocational education might help us to appreciate rather better what a given subject, form of knowledge or activity is actually *for* in the context of schooling. Precisely, it might assist us to appreciate, in terms which are more rational than dogmatic, the distinctive contribution that a given activity may have to make to some aspect of the development of persons in a way which enables us to recognize and respect both their human individuality as well as their important moral and cultural kinship with others.

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1. For the classic source of this critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction, of course, see Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two dogmas of empiricism," in his *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953).

2. For significant attempts to separate the analytic-synthetic from kindred distinctions see William and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), ch. 10, sec. 5 ; and Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
3. Such problems are, of course, first raised in the works of Plato. See, for example, Plato's *Republic* , in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), particularly Books III, IV and VIII.
4. In particular, see Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: and other essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965).
5. It was, of course, the English Education Act of 1944 which proposed to allocate children to different sorts of schools -- grammar, technical and secondary -- on the basis of differences of "aptitude" and "ability." The general obsession with designing and constructing intelligence tests which up until this time seemed to be the well nigh exclusive occupation of educational psychologists is now no longer quite so fashionable -- especially since the falling into academic disrepute of Sir Cyril Burt, one of the founding fathers of the psychometric movement.
6. For a good example of the conservative elitist viewpoint see Geoffrey H. Bantock, "Towards a Theory of Popular Education," in *The Curriculum: Context, Design and Development*, ed. Richard Hooper (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1971); and for a prime instance of a liberal egalitarian see John P. White, *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).
7. See, for example, Richard Pring, "Liberal Education and Vocational Preparation," *Beyond Liberal Education: Essays in Honour of Paul H. Hirst*, ed. Robin Barrow and Patricia White (London: Routledge, 1994); and Richard Pring, "Liberal and Vocational Education," in *The Victor Cook Memorial Lectures*, ed. John Haldane (University of St. Andrews, Centre for Philosophy and Public Affairs, 1994).
8. See, for example, John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963); and John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
9. In the U.K. recently, for example, Channel 4 Television conducted a special investigation into the current state of British secondary schooling under the direction of such local educational luminaries as Alan H. Halsey, Neville Postlethwaite, S.J. Prais, Alan Smithers and Hilary Steedman. The subsequent report entitled "Every Child in Britain," (London: Channel 4, 1991) concluded that British education compares unfavorably with many of its European competitors with respect to its failure to take seriously, among other things, the idea of a *practical education*.
10. Richard S. Peters's conflation of all the relevant distinctions is a conspicuous feature of his pioneering work, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), especially chs. I, II and V.
11. Certainly this was often assumed to be a consequence of Paul H. Hirst's influential defence of liberal education in his highly acclaimed article "Liberal education and the nature of knowledge," reprinted, among other places, in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. Richard S. Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). It is likely, however, that this perspective represented something of a misreading of Hirst.
12. It is quite striking that official curriculum policy documents and proposals hardly ever appeal to non-instrumental defences of the value of conventional school subjects. Even the Scottish Munn Report of 1977, which follows Hirst almost to the letter in its overall rationale, resorts to explicit instrumental justifications of particular curriculum subjects and activities. See, Scottish Education Department, *The Structure of the Curriculum in the Third and Fourth Years of the Scottish Secondary School*, (Edinburgh: H.M.S.O., 1977).