I am grateful for the invitation to respond to Barbara and Derek Ball’s response, MT201, to our three papers (MT194, MT196 and MT199). Although there are clearly some differences in the ways in which we view things, it seems equally clear that there are areas of substantial agreement, although I tend to take a different perspective on aspects of the infantilisation (a new word to me) that they argue permeates English education. However, before commenting on the details of what they write, I would like to address their comment that ‘Paul ends the first [article] suggesting that as a result of having done this research he is ashamed of admitting he is English’.

My shame derives from more than just the lack of warranted practice in English schools. It reflects a long-held view that policy-making in this country is determined more by politicians’ perceptions of what will appease the electorate than what might lead to a more equitable and better-educated society. For example, in almost any other country, any person making claims to being educated will speak a second language. Now I know there are all sorts of reasons why others are able to learn English effectively – the dominance of English in popular music, the hegemony of Hollywood as the producer of popular cinema, and so on – but that is no excuse for the impoverished state of second language learning in this country. It is but one symptom of an anti-intellectual culture. As I was writing this response, I saw an article on BBC television news (touted throughout the world as a model of good practice in public service broadcasting) concerning a French proposal in the late 1950s for the merging of the UK and France into a single state. The report drew on all the least tasteful stereotypes of the two countries: the wine-drinking, snail-snacking French and the beer-swilling, chip-chomping British. If this is the level of public discourse in this country, then yes, I am ashamed.

Worse, we have no Bill of Rights and have to rely on Strasbourg for steers in this direction. We have no written constitution and I am denied, more than 350 years after our revolution, the right to elect my head of State. I live in a system in which the Church of England, a club to which I would never seek to belong, is established to govern in ways that allow those who adhere to a particular worldview to tell me how I should live my life. Yes, I am ashamed to be English because there is little in the manner of our governance, and the impact of that governance on the educational system, from which I might derive pride; the Welsh, the Scots and the Northern Irish all have a voice in their national affairs, but I have to accept the continuing avoidance of the West Lothian question.

Barbara and Derek believe that the ‘school run’ infantilises children. I disagree. It does not infantilise but victimise. The school run derives from the myth of parental choice promulgated by successive governments. It reflects a continued failure to invest in public transport, unfulfilled promises to provide footpaths and cycle tracks and the fear, perpetrated by irresponsible media, that behind every tree hides a paedophile. The school run does not infantilise children, but reflects (further fuelling my shame) officially sanctioned untruths and a systemic avoidance of issues of equity. The school run derives from fear and makes children victims.

In our earlier articles, we construed classroom conformity in many European countries as a positive characteristic of the ways in which teachers manage the learning of their students. Barbara and Derek seem to take a different view, and I do not understand why they construe conformity pejoratively. Every day I conform to societal norms by driving on the left-hand side of the road. The reasons for my conformity are obvious but demonstrate well that it can be construed positively. I do not construe conformity, as found in most English...
schools, in this positive sense, but as reflecting a systemic educational ambition less concerned with the cognitive development of learners than on the maintenance of power relationships and deference. An educational system focused on genuine autonomy would encourage public debate about the nature of democracy and the rights (and commensurate responsibilities) of citizenship. It would seek, explicitly and unambiguously, to empower rather than constrain. But we are not citizens, and the intellectual basis for suggesting we are has as much substance as the Emperor’s new clothes.

Returning explicitly to mathematics, I disagree with Barbara and Derek as to the means by which autonomy is achieved. Unlike Barbara and Derek, I think autonomy derives from positive conformity. Over the years, my observations of classrooms in this country and on the continent have led me to believe that in many European countries, and a minority of English schools, teachers encourage children to share and debate solutions to the problems they are offered. Through this public activity, sensitively managed by skilful teachers, students develop not only self-awareness as learners but also a repertoire of high-level cognitive and behavioural skills. Such opportunities allow all, not just a few, to become skilled problem solvers and to acquire, consequently, autonomy.

I commented in MT on my early visits to Budapest and expressed both surprise and concern that teacher education students spent relatively little time on school-based work and lengthy periods studying pedagogy; although I suspect that my colleagues really meant didactics, but were aware that this is not a word used in English education. It is only now I can say that I understand why this was the case. Unlike in England, where teacher education students are encouraged to find a teaching style with which they feel comfortable, Hungarian students are expected (and expect) to conform to a particular way of working which tradition has warranted as an effective way of achieving societal educational objectives. The emphasis, therefore, is not on individual approaches to teaching but on the construction of intellectually warranted accounts for the presentation of mathematical content which are also expected to conform to societal expectations of good mathematics. Neither of these components resonates particularly well with English teacher education, and suggest, to me at least, that a collectivist tradition located in a positive conformity may have much to recommend it if we are to achieve a coherent and intellectually worthwhile experience for all learners of mathematics in our schools.

Barbara and Derek clearly diverge from other conclusions of ours – though we would prefer to describe them as observations intended to provoke discussion – concerning teacher autonomy. Indeed, like Barbara and Derek, our intention was to encourage the questioning of taken-for-granted practices, but, unlike Barbara and Derek, the more I see of other classrooms the more I find myself shifting from the view I have held all my career that teachers should have more rather than less freedom to make pedagogical decisions. I realise that such an assertion may appear to align me more with Margaret Thatcher, the doyenne of educational infantilisation, than a serious analyst of educational practice. However, Barbara and Derek’s assertion that ‘teachers have more freedom to make pedagogical decisions and their students to make mathematical choices if they are not tied to predetermined goals’ misses the point. The freedom to make decisions does not necessarily imply that those decisions are correct, and predetermined goals are not, of themselves, barriers to effective teaching. For example, the first year of our project was spent observing lessons in each of the five countries, and the first country to be so visited was England. During the discussions that followed each observation, it became increasingly clear that our colleagues were bewildered by the lack of a consistent approach to mathematics teaching and the variety of practices which, to them, seemed to have little by way of a developed and articulated rationale. A number of colleagues, having observed a CAME lesson, could not understand why the development of the skills of mathematical reasoning were not integrated into the fabric of every lesson rather than presented in an inconsistent and incoherent bolt-on manner. Other colleagues could not understand why so many lessons started with an activity unrelated to the content of the lesson about to be taught. Now, while I am not trying to suggest that such activities are, of themselves, reflective of poor practice, the reaction of our colleagues seemed to suggest that the learning of mathematics for many English students lacks both intellectual and didactic coherence. My concerns in this direction were thrown into stark relief when I read Gabriele Kaiser’s recent analysis of the teaching of mathematics in England, Germany and France. The picture she presents, for most English learners, of an intellectually impoverished and idiosyncratic mathematical experience is not only depressing but further justification of the need for a collectivist tradition located in positive conformity.

The late Brian Simon, whom I am sure Derek would have known from his days at Leicester
University, spent his entire career arguing passionately for an educational system that would offer all learners a worthwhile and meaningful education irrespective of their social backgrounds. In so doing, he argued for an English pedagogy, something which has still to be defined, to challenge the unwarranted individualism he believed underpinned the English educational system. Indeed, he wrote in the recently republished version of his often-quoted 1981 chapter, that ‘the concept of ‘pedagogy’ has been shunned in England’ while ‘our approach to educational theory and practice has tended to be amateurish, and highly pragmatic in character’ (Simon, 1999: 34). He adds that ‘the term ‘pedagogy’ itself implies structure; it implies the elaboration or definition of specific means adapted to produce the desired effect: such-and-such learning on the part of the child’ (39). Sadly, I have seen little over my thirty years as a teacher to convince me that structure, elaboration or definition play anything but peripheral roles in the construction of many English mathematics lessons, and worry that the amateurish and pragmatic character of the classrooms Brian Simon so wanted to change will persist.

In the light of Brian Simon’s concerns, I think Barbara and Derek’s pleas for less regulation of teachers’ activity, while appropriate for a few talented teachers, may lead to too many children being disenfranchised. I acknowledge that the current regime has done little to improve mathematics teaching in England, but that does not mean that regulation cannot be effective. As I have tried to argue, the mathematical needs of our children demand conformity to a coherent curricular and pedagogical tradition rather than the encouragement of many.

A cursory glance round any English school will alert us to the unwarranted practices perpetrated in it. For example, as we indicated in our third article, we know of several secondary schools teaching periods of 100 minutes. Speaking with a colleagues from one of these schools, the changes seemed more concerned with minimising movement around school buildings than any consideration of learning, and when learning was discussed it transpired that the interests of mathematics were subordinated to the requirements of technology and PE. Moreover, the same colleague added that teachers in his department frequently played games and PE. Moreover, the same colleague added that teachers in his department frequently played games rather than address the scheme of work because ‘over-regulation’ of the able child, but its warrant is rhetorical. Acceleration fails the learner because it emphasises the destination at the cost of taking in the journey and promotes, does as does allowing schools freedom to determine lesson lengths, educational irresponsibility.

However, while many of Barbara and Derek’s comments are focused on critiquing our proposal for greater regulation, I think the real area of debate concerns the extent to which regulation implies a framework or a prescription. I am suggesting that intelligently-planned regulation (and I acknowledge this may be an oxymoron in this country) would offer teachers affordances rather than constraints. They suggest that ‘over-regulation’ is just what we do not want: it infantilises teachers and does not help to produce an environment where students and teachers are empowered to be autonomous learners’. I believe their perspective draws on a negative understanding of conformity and a false belief that regulation is necessarily undesirable. I believe warranted regulation has the potential to improve the mathematical experiences of many more learners than, as the evidence above seems to suggest, continuing to allow a multiplicity of practice based on individual prejudice and whimsy. Anyone who reads Gabriele Kaiser’s paper will understand exactly why I believe we need to promote a warranted collectivist tradition located in positive conformity.

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