THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PIONEER STUDIES OF
MICHAEL SADLER FOR TODAY'S
COMPARATIVE EDUCATIONISTS

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During the course of his long life (1861-1943) Michael Sadler assembled a vast body of material which had a world coverage. This data offers scope for researches from several different angles. There is an abundance of material for younger scholars to investigate and make illuminating connections with today's problems. For comparativists not least worthy of study is how Michael Sadler, whilst a Civil Servant, developed a methodology and articulated principles for «the dispassionate and scientific examination of the educational facts at issue».

In his introduction to the Sadler anthology (1) Lord Asa Briggs, Chancellor of the Open University comments:

Sadler's writings spanned many decades and have long-term meaning because they are concerned with long-term development of an industrial society and a more democratic world.

For today's comparative educationists the data assembled by Michael Sadler offers scope for research, analysis and re-interpretation from several different angles. There is the primary source material of historical, sociological and educational significance. For specific countries and areas of the world there are retrospective records. Embodied in the factual descriptions there are underlying assumptions and concepts that link Sadler's times and our own. It was Sadler who told a Scottish audience in 1907 that:

The significance of any plan or system of education lies in its presuppositions. The inner life of it is to be found in the social and moral ideal which it attempts to express (2).

This pre-occupation with underlying concepts was crystallised in a comprehensive comparison in which Sadler indicated German, American, French and English approaches to education when he wrote:

Different nations lay different stress on this or the other outcome of secondary education. The German is apt to ask about a young man — what does he know? The American to ask — what can he do? The Frenchman to ask — what examinations has he passed? The
Englishman's usual question is — what sort of fellow is he? All four, however, are tacitly referring to a current and rather vague idea, prevalent in their respective countries, as to whither a prolonged course of education should have led? (3)

Dr. Oliver Pickering has put on record some 600 items reflecting Sadler's thinking and diagnosis of his times. From this and other sources I have compiled an Appendix which reveals how Sadler assembled studies, some penetrating in detail, others more tangential, with a world coverage. So far as Europe is concerned I have shared with colleagues over the years — often much to their surprise that such data existed in England — papers dealing with educational developments in France, Belgium, Holland and The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Portugal and Hungary. But Sadler ranged far beyond Europe, through the colonies of the former British Empire, to the Far East including Japan and China.

Across the Atlantic (over which he made four journeys, three to the United States and one to Canada) he prepared exhaustive accounts of aims and achievements in American education. At the turn of the century he crystallized his comparative approach in this comment:

In the educational movement which is beginning to excite more attention all over the world, there are three great representatives, each typical of a somewhat different point of view and each contributing a different kind of experience — Germany, the British Empire and the United States of America. Germany stands for unity based on the State; America for variety based on the individual; the British Empire for the attempt at moral unity based, partly on individual experience, partly on administrative organization (4).

In terms of Sadler's basic judgement, there is scope for extended studies of each of these three areas, in the course of which one would continually be faced with the tension between State and centralized or totalitarian control, and the potential of individual and local freedom for development. For some years now, in the University of Hamburg, Professor Jack Sislian has sponsored an effective seminar on Sadler's German studies. He writes:

The more I read now what Michael Sadler had to say about State, Education and the Individual when he was comparing English life and institutions with those of Germany the more I am speechless at the accuracy of his observations, insights and conclusions. Some forty-three years separate me from him, yet every time I read him I feel he is my contemporary.

There remains still another aspect of Sadler's work which would repay detailed study — how he developed a methodology. It was his achievement
to systematize and extend, with an emphasis on sociological insight and scientific accuracy, the tentative accounts of foreign systems made by English forerunners such as Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, Dr. James Fraser, and Matthew Arnold. Most influential was Sadler’s acquaintance with American researches in the nineteenth century stemming from the National Bureau of Education founded in 1867.

Sadler shaped the first English centre for comparative studies in education when he was appointed Director of the Office of Special Inquiries and Reports during the years 1895 to 1903. It is significant that in the first volume of these Reports, published in 1897, Sadler includes a paper on the National Bureau of Education. It is clear that this paper was inserted for the benefit of the Government doubters who questioned the need to spend money on comparative studies.

At a later date Sadler spelled out in precise terms what he conceived to be the chief object of the research department which he directed:

... to collect, summarize, and publish various kinds of educational experience, with a view to (1) getting what is sound and true from a number of discrepant opinions; (2) informing the nation how it stands in regard to educational efficiency as compared with other nations; and (3) promoting, as far as possible, general consent and agreement as to the wisest and most fruitful line of development in national education (5).

For a Civil Servant, working within the constraints of a Government department, this was an ambitious vision, and how it led to Sadler’s downfall is a fascinating cul-de-sac of history. But, I suggest the general principles which he enunciated are still valid for today’s students of comparative education.

REFERENCES

3. Vol IX. 1902. Education in Germany, in Special Reports issued by the Office of Special Inquiries and Reports from H.M.S.O. London 1902.
Indication of an instrument of research:


Sir Michael Sadler (1861-1943) was successively Secretary of the Oxford University Extension Delegacy, Director of the Office of Special Inquiries and Reports at the Board of Education, Professor of the History and Administration of Education at Manchester University, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University, and Master of University College, Oxford. He was one of the foremost, and most far-seeing, educationalists of his day; an outstanding propagandist and speaker; and an enlightened collector and advocate of modern art. In this bibliography of Sadler's published writings Dr. Pickering has assembled 631 items stretching over sixty-seven years. It is an authoritative guide to the range and diversity of Sir Michael Sadler's intellectual activity.