

SELECTION BY STEALTH

In this edition we focus upon the question of selective education, the “return” of which, by stealth, is a very real possibility. “Return” is in quotes because, of course, selection has never really gone away. Fifteen LAs, including three very large ones, have remained wholly or very substantially selective ever since 1948 and another twenty five LAs have retained at least one selective school. The great majority of the latter are within large conurbations, so their effect in undermining the principle of comprehensive schooling is far greater than their numbers would at first suggest.

A good example of this can be seen in the large West Midlands conurbation, where there are still ten selective schools: four for boys, four for girls and two mixed. Children from all over the conurbation (and a few from outside it) apply for places at these schools. This leads to a private “prep” school industry, which specialises in coaching for the 11+ test. Each school uses its own 11+ test so **some children may find themselves sitting as many as six separate tests.**

Those who “fail” not only suffer a loss of self-esteem but most then find themselves at secondary schools which they know that their parents did not wish them to attend, many of which, however good, are comprehensive only in name. The wealthier ones are often sent to private secondary schools which, ironically, would probably not be viable without the 11+. There is a clear hierarchy of status among the grammar schools and life at one of the “top” ones can become very pressurised, a phenomenon well illustrated in the article by a former girls’ grammar school teacher.

The three large LAs are **Kent, Buckinghamshire and Lincolnshire**, although the last has some designated “all-ability” areas (from which many “able” children migrate to grammar schools in other areas).

The article by John Bajina, a governor in **Buckinghamshire**, is a stark reminder of the way in which selection at 11 is sustained by intellectual and political dishonesty. These LAs have secondary modern schools, many of which are heavily criticised by OFSTED for shortcomings which can be traced back to the 11+ but their local politicians only wish to talk about grammar schools.

Currently **Kent** is trying to open a new grammar school by pretending that it is a “satellite” of an “expanding” school over ten miles away. The Secretary of State appears to have postponed a decision until after the election but, if the ruse succeeds, it could open the way for a whole host of imitators. In **Gloucestershire** two grammar schools have decided to expand by a whopping 25%, a policy which will completely undermine neighbouring schools already denied a fully comprehensive intake. This decision is driven by finance: grammar schools, being socially exclusive, receive hardly any Pupil Premium money and are starting to complain. One **Lincolnshire** MP has already raised the matter in Parliament.

On the bright side, we conclude with an account by Melissa Benn of two student debates in which she took part, at the universities of Manchester and Cambridge. It is encouraging that, when presented with the evidence, students at both universities voted for comprehensive schooling. Indeed at Cambridge, Melissa and her colleagues achieved a 33% swing.

CASE believes in a full comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

Why bringing back grammar schools is not proving a popular idea...

Two successes for the comprehensive argument in recent student union debates.

By Melissa Benn, Chair of Comprehensive Future

The first was held on February 5th, at Manchester Debating Union, the largest student debating body in the country, where Professor Bernard Barker and I were arguing against Robert McCartney of the National Grammar Schools Association and Graham Brady MP on the motion: "This House Supports the Re-Introduction of Grammar Schools".

After a heated, but largely good tempered, discussion between panellists and from the floor the motion was defeated. (Initial voting had suggested a narrow margin against the motion; we increased our share of the vote after the debate.) One of the key themes raised in this discussion was whether comprehensive schools produce good results – we argued that they certainly can – and, a slightly different point here, cater for really bright children. On the latter point, we heard anecdotes from either side of the argument. Robert McCartney tried to suggest that comprehensive education was based on sloppy, overly 'progressive' and child-centred ideas of teaching and learning. It seems that MDU agreed with us that Mr McCartney was behind the times on this issue.

I took part in a similar debate at the Cambridge Union on February 19th. Here our challenge was greater than it was in Manchester as voting at the beginning of the debate was in favour of the motion "This House Would Re-introduce Grammar Schools"; our job was to persuade the 'House' otherwise.

Our opponents were Robert McCartney (again), Andrew Shilling, a parent leading a campaign to set up a new/"satellite" grammar school in Kent and Shaun Fenton, Head of Reigate Grammar, an independent school. Our side was represented by Michael Pyke of CASE, Ndidi Okezie, of Teach First, and myself, recently elected Chair of Comprehensive Future.

Again, we won this debate, quite decisively, with a swing of 33% in our favour.

In my view, this was due to two main elements. Firstly, even those arguing for the 'reintroduction' of grammar schools could not really justify the historic waste of talent and opportunity – ably elaborated by Michael Pyke – that resulted from the post war division between grammars and secondary moderns. The argument, on their side, seems to have shifted from the reintroduction of a mandatory 11 plus to the importance of offering an 'academic' education to a few (most of whom, judging on current figures, are likely to come from relatively affluent homes) with good comprehensives for the rest. (No-one uses the term 'secondary moderns' any more, for obvious reasons). The fact that you cannot have a grammar and comprehensive system running side by side cannot be stated too often.

Secondly, our side's strength lay in our detailed exposition of the evidence of the slow and steady educational success brought about by comprehensive education in this country over the last fifty years, the fact that selection clearly harms the opportunities and achievements of poor children (this argument was powerfully expressed by Ndidi Okezie) and that large parts of the Tory party now recognise that selection harms the majority. Finally, we have learned a great deal about what makes a good comprehensive system, and school, over the last fifty years, leading to some examples of stunning schools around the country, and particularly in poorer areas.

For all these reasons (and more) there is now a broad cross-party consensus that non-selective schools – a good local school for all – is the only rational principle on which to run a state education system and that it would be fatal to return to a damaging and divisive system of old.

Reader, they agreed with us.

Editor's note: Melissa summed up for us at Cambridge and her witty and sparkling conclusion to the debate was an important factor in our achieving such a big swing.

New 11+ increases inequality for Buckinghamshire children

By John Bajina, a school governor in Buckinghamshire

In 2012 Buckinghamshire County Council acknowledged that the 11+ test in this fully selective county impacted negatively on children from poorer, disadvantaged and Black and Minority Ethnic families.

The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools Company (TBGS) then commissioned CEM (a research centre at Durham University) to produce **The New 11+** “to tackle the issue of private tutoring”.

This test was immediately brought into use, even though no critical impact study had been carried out, and on 21st October 2013, TBGS hailed the New 11+ a success. A spokesman told the *Bucks Free Press* that “data is being analysed but early indications from our primary school colleagues are that the test is appropriate for the purpose for which it was designed” (i.e. to be fairer).

The group LEE (“Local, Equal, Excellent”), which campaigns against selection in Buckinghamshire, has analysed the data from the LA on the New 11+ using results from 2013 and 2014. The group has established that, so far from lessening the effects of wealth and social privilege, the New 11+ has resulted in:

- much higher pass rates for children living in more affluent districts
- much higher pass rates for children from private schools
- an average increase of 34% in the number of out-of-area children obtaining entry into Buckinghamshire grammar schools
- much lower pass rates for children on free school meals
- much lower pass rates for children of Pakistani and African Caribbean heritage
- much lower pass rates for children who speak English as an additional language
- 100 vacant places this year in grammar schools while virtually all secondary modern schools are over-subscribed, even those schools in Special Measures and Requiring Improvement

To date no one, whether the TBGS, the LA or local politicians, has disputed LEE’s figures in any meaningful way. Moreover in November 2014, TBGS publicly admitted at a County Council Select Committee hearing that there is no such thing as a “tutor-proof” exam, and that they had issues with promoting social mobility.

Nevertheless, TBGS shows no sign of abandoning the already discredited New 11+.

Local campaigning groups, the Anti-Selection Group and LEE are apolitical. However, politics plays a major part in maintaining the selective system so we must remain knowledgeable about the political landscape.

The Wycombe Labour Party has reaffirmed very publicly its anti-selection stance. So has Labour’s Parliamentary Candidate, David Williams.

However, Buckinghamshire has been a Conservative ruled county since Noah released from the Ark a pair of grammar school children first and a pair of secondary modern children last. Local politicians and local area MPs will not even discuss the inequities perpetuated by selection - let alone countenance abolition. They believe that it would lose them votes.

Life in the pressure cooker

"Is it on the spec, Miss?" – one of the most disheartening questions asked in almost every lesson by exam students in my highly selective girls grammar school. Love of learning may have been part of the mission statement, but it was knocked out of the students early in their school lives, along with creativity, self-esteem and independence, by the burden of too much homework and the over-riding imperative to pass exams.

It was always a pleasure to see the bright shiny Year 7s, in uniforms that might fit them by the time they got to Year 11, carrying their oversized back-packs and the hopes and expectations of their families. For some, this was the long-awaited moment, when those years of coaching for the Entrance Test finally paid off – they had arrived, no need for further coaching; they were set for life. Or so their parents believed.

Of course the proof of the pudding is in the testing, which begins after a few short weeks and ends with A-Levels. Little girls, used to being top of the class, the reliable helpers, showing visitors round their primary schools, and reading aloud at school events, praised for working quickly and getting the right answers, suddenly find themselves as 'run of the mill', or worse - bottom of the class or in the bottom set for a subject. Self-esteem takes a hit and some girls never recover from the blow. These girls struggle throughout school and are always a 'cause for concern' – the concern being that they won't get an A or A* in their GCSEs.

These top grades are the bench-mark of success and anything less is a failure. Of course, the students, whose only measure of success is academic, internalise these 'failures' and see themselves as failing. For many students, the fear of 'getting it wrong' stifles any willingness to take risks and they become passive consumers, rather than active participants in their own education.

It is very difficult, in a school where students are considered as assets on an exam spreadsheet or percentages in an Ofsted report, for students and teachers to maintain a sense of perspective. The students can't see that if they were in a non-selective school, they would be shining stars, and neither can some teachers who have no experience of teaching in a 'normal' school. There is something wrong when children tell you they are 'rubbish' at maths because they are only getting an A.

The exam culture and narrow curricula, stifle creativity and independent thought. Extra-curricular activities are often undertaken, not out of any sense of contribution or real desire, but to satisfy university entrance requirements or pad out a UCAS form. It is no surprise to me that the top jobs in the professions, in business, in the third sector and in politics are taken by people who attended public school, when grammar school girls of such high ability leave school lacking the self-belief, ambition or passion for any cause.

The author recently resigned from her post in a "top" girls' grammar school

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