

Comprehensive Success Story

Introduction

Origins

Before the 1944 Education Act, the vast majority of Britain's children attended Elementary Schools and went into the workforce at age 14. "Secondary" education, the route to university and the professions, was available in Grammar Schools and "Public" (i.e. private) Schools but involved expense that most parents could not afford.

19th Century ideas live on

The Act promised "secondary education for all" and seemed to be ushering in an era of new opportunities for Britain's children, but the provision contained within the Act was based on ideas derived from the 19th century. These had been reinforced by the Hadow Report of 1926 and the Norwood Report of 1943, which had argued that schoolchildren could be identified as belonging to one of three groups: those who were by nature "academic"; those who were gifted with technical skills, and those who would need to be trained to carry out routine practical tasks.

These categories corresponded to broad divisions within the work force. Accordingly, the new system would be "tripartite": following a selection test at age 11, children would be allocated to one of three types of secondary school. "Academic" children would attend a Grammar School while the rest would transfer to a new kind of school, known as a Secondary Modern. Of the latter, those children who had shown the necessary aptitude would be able to transfer to a Technical School at age 13. The minimum school leaving age would be raised in 1947 from 14 to 15.

Unequal beginnings

In a Britain struggling to recover from five years of war, the introduction of the new system was not straightforward. Although some new Grammar Schools would need to be established, the great majority were already in existence and were able to maintain virtually unbroken continuity with their pre-war identities, so retaining their prestige.

For the new Secondary Moderns, on the other hand, it was clear that a major building programme would be needed. In the meantime, these were mostly housed in the old Elementary and Central schools (Central Schools were for children who wished to continue in education for one or two years beyond Elementary School). Some even shared their buildings with primary schools and were known as "all age" schools.

As for the promised Technical Schools, very few were ever built. Thus, whereas "academic" children were able, in most cases, to transfer to long established and prestigious institutions, the rest had to make do with buildings and facilities belonging to an era which the new Act was supposed to have abolished. There was, inevitably, a huge gap in status between the Grammar Schools and the rest, which to most people seemed to be merely a continuation of the old Elementary Schools.

This impression was reinforced when the new schools, when finally built, were given the same kind of utilitarian names as their predecessors.

Early gender-bias

There was another problem associated with accommodation: the number of "academic" children was not a constant proportion of the age group but fluctuated according to the number of Grammar School places available in an area. This meant that while some Local Education Authorities could offer Grammar School places to as many as 40% of the cohort, others might find that only 18% of their children were "academic".

Also, Grammar School provision was designed to maintain a balance of the sexes, an arrangement which favoured less able boys at the expense of able girls: if the children selected for Grammar Schools in any one year had simply been the most able members of the cohort, almost two-thirds of them would have been girls.

Unfair testing

A third problem was the lack of any nationally agreed method of testing pupils at 11, with each LEA being left to devise its own approach. This led to inconsistency from one area to the next: whereas some LEAs relied upon standardised tests of aptitude plus measured IQ (intelligence quotient) or VRQ (verbal reasoning quotient), others required essays to be written or called "borderline" pupils for interview. Even the most reliable tests were considered to have a margin for error of +/- 10%.

Although, in theory, pupils selected for the "wrong" kind of education could be transferred if the mistake was identified soon enough, in practice, this very rarely happened.

For all these reasons the system was never free from controversy. Parents with ambitions for their children were extremely quick to recognise the crucial importance of "passing" the 11+ since only at a Grammar School would a child have any prospect of obtaining qualifications.

Class bias

Children were equally quick to absorb parental anxiety, so that "failing" the 11+ was often a devastating experience. Middle class parents sent their children to private tutors to be taught how to deal with standardised tests, a practice that had been shown by Burt, Eysenck and others to increase a child's IQ/VRQ by up to 10 points. Those middle class children who "failed" were often sent to private schools, rather than the Secondary Modern. As a result, primary schools felt under pressure to maximise their 11+ "passes" while knowing that most of their children were bound to "fail".

Bias revealed

It was clear by the late 1950s that 11+ selection was hugely weighted in favour of middle class children. The Early Leaving Report (1954) found that children from the semi-skilled and unskilled working classes obtained only half as many Grammar School places as they would statistically be expected to.

The Crowther Report (1959), found that middle-class entrants to National Service were three times more likely to have had some form of selective education, mainly in



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Grammar Schools, than those with a working-class background. This was at a time when 75% of the adult population was employed in manual work.

Of those working class children who did go to Grammar School, most left at 16 and very few went to university: the Robbins Report (1963) found that in 1962 only 6% of undergraduates had fathers in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations.

Arguments for a comprehensive system emerge

The reasons for this bias were elucidated in important sociological works, such as *Education and the Working Class* (Jackson and Marsden 1962). The consensus of these and other commentators was that 11+ selection was both unfair and wasteful of children's ability and that a system of comprehensive secondary schooling would achieve overall better results.

There were also economic arguments for changing to a comprehensive system. By 1960 it was clear by that Britain could no longer afford to educate just a small proportion of the population in the Grammar Schools, leaving the rest to struggle as "factory fodder" in a manufacturing sector that was beginning to dwindle. The truth of this was recognised by both the Conservative government and the Labour opposition, as well as by the LEAs themselves.

The small number of comprehensive schools that had been established, such as Woodberry Down in Hackney, seemed to offer a better model, in which more children would aspire to educational success and in which their future would not have been determined by a single examination at age 11 which was admitted to have at least a 10% margin of error.

Government ambivalence

By the time Harold Wilson won the 1964 election, 90 out of 163 LEAs had already prepared plans to change to a comprehensive system and it was a formality for Wilson to instruct the remainder to do so. Even so, Wilson stated that the Grammar Schools would be "destroyed over my dead body". He claimed later that he had meant only that the academic excellence of the Grammar Schools would live on within the new comprehensive schools but this statement was only the first of many examples of government ambivalence towards its own policy for secondary education, an ambivalence that has never gone away.

Left to local decisions

When the Conservatives were returned to power in 1970, Edward Heath rescinded Wilson's instruction and left it to LEAs to decide whether or not to introduce comprehensive schools. In spite of this, the momentum for change was great (not least because of parental desire for it) and the introduction of comprehensive schools continued throughout the country. By 1990 88% of Britain's secondary age pupils were in comprehensive schools.

Ill-planned birth

However, the birth of the new system was far from ideal. For a start, there was a wide divergence of practice, both in the way change was introduced and in the types of school created. Pessimistic assumptions about the number of pupils who would stay on to take A-levels led many LEAs to create overwhelmingly huge schools so that viable Sixth Forms could be developed. Others developed smaller 11-16 schools which fed a single Sixth Form College and there were various other models which there is no space to describe.

Often there was insufficient planning and preparation, leading to inherently chaotic forms of organisation, such as "split site" schools. In many areas teachers and pupils found themselves almost overnight in unrecognisable institutions, with new colleagues, new teachers and new classmates.

Vested interests prevail

Worse than any of this, however, was the failure of national and local politicians to confront the vested interests of the most prestigious Grammar Schools. As a result a significant minority of LEAs was allowed to avoid changing, either partly or wholly. To this day there are 15 LEAs in England which still have fully selective systems and another 21 which have retained some grammar schools. In such LEAs the comprehensive school is seen as "second best". Only in Wales and Scotland has a fully comprehensive system of secondary schools been introduced.

A balanced intake needed

Not only were comprehensive schools introduced in a hasty, unprepared and half-hearted manner but successive governments have undermined them both in words and practice. It was always believed by those who advocated the introduction of comprehensive schools that it was essential for each school to have a socially and academically balanced intake. Research carried out over the years has overwhelmingly confirmed the truth of this: in such schools there is a "levelling up" of aspirations and achievement. However, the partial retention of selection in urban areas coupled with the increasing reliance by successive governments upon "market forces" to raise standards has meant that in our large towns and cities very few schools have been able to achieve this kind of balance.

A hierarchy of schools

Instead a hierarchy of schools has been established, in which the most successful institutions are those with a high proportion of the more affluent children. The position of such schools is reinforced by league tables which draw attention to their good examination results and by OFSTED reports which draw attention to the good behaviour of pupils. At the bottom of the hierarchy are those schools which have a large intake of deprived children, many of whom suffer from serious emotional difficulties. Such schools are comprehensive only in name.

Promise betrayed

Before coming to power, "New" Labour had promised to end selection. Once elected, it drew back from this undertaking and insisted that remaining Grammar Schools and their attendant Secondary Modern Schools could only be converted to comprehensive schools if "eligible" local parents voted for this measure in a system of balloting so Byzantine that it was impossible for change to be achieved. Furthermore, Labour proved itself to be just as enthusiastic about "market forces" as any of its predecessors and, although spending much needed and overdue money on improvements to buildings and equipment, failed to narrow the gap between the best and worst performing schools in urban areas.

Instead it emphasised the idea of "choice and diversity", encouraging the establishment of a bewildering range of different types of school within urban areas, all of them to be preferred, by implication, to "ordinary" comprehensive schools. Worst of all, formal academic selection actually increased under Labour as Grammar schools were allowed to expand their intake. Fortunately, the picture

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in "shire" counties, such as Staffordshire and Cheshire, was very different.

Comprehensives still a success story

Nevertheless, the evidence is that, in spite of its inauspicious beginning and the continued reluctance of government to give it whole hearted support, the comprehensive system has been a great improvement upon the tripartite system that preceded it.

Firstly, there has been a huge increase in the number of children leaving school with useful qualifications. In the early 1960s, the heyday of the Grammar Schools, around 16% of pupils obtained 5 or more passes at O-level, while 75% of pupils left school with no qualifications at all. The modern equivalent - 5 GCSE passes at grade C or better, including English and Maths - is now obtained by over half of all pupils. It is a confirmation of this huge improvement that the new Coalition government now seeks to institute new benchmarks. The number of pupils leaving school with no qualifications has dropped to 3%.

There has also been a huge increase - from 6% in 1962 to 43% in 2006 - in the number of pupils who take A-levels and go on to university. Even allowing for controversial and unproven allegations that public examinations have become easier, there is no doubt that there has been an enormous rise in the aspirations and achievements of pupils who in the 1960s would have been rejected as "non-academic". This sea-change in aspirations demonstrates the pointlessness of dividing children at age 11 into "academic" and "non-academic" categories.

Better overall

Secondly, it is clear, when we compare like with like, that overall results in those authorities that have fully comprehensive systems are better than those in authorities that have retained selection. Research carried out by Professor David Jesson at the University of York consistently demonstrates that, whereas the most able 25% of pupils in comprehensive schools achieve at least as well as their contemporaries in Grammar Schools, the least able pupils in Secondary Modern Schools perform worse than their contemporaries in comprehensive schools.

Moreover, those authorities that have remained fully selective, such as Lincolnshire and Kent, are regularly over-represented in OFSTED's lists of worst performing schools. In other words, genuinely comprehensive systems are able to raise the aspirations of the least able while not depressing those of the most able. This contradicts the often repeated prophecy that comprehensive schools would inevitably "level down" the achievements of the most able: it emerges that the opposite is the case.

Thirdly, no LA has reintroduced selection and those that have attempted to do so, such as Solihull, have been defeated by parental opposition. Moreover, parental support for selection has steadily declined from 90% in 1957 to 27% in 1997. This suggests that parents have been increasingly satisfied with comprehensive schooling and that what the great majority desire is a good, local, comprehensive school.

Common misconceptions about comprehensive schools

What's wrong with selection - it happens in life?

The purpose of a national education system is to develop the potential of society's children to the optimum level. Selection at 11 does not achieve this. Therefore the fact

that selection "happens in life" is not relevant to this argument.

Don't Grammar Schools offer poor children a route out of the ghetto?

This is a popular fallacy. In the existing 164 Grammar Schools, only 2% of the children are eligible for free school meals, compared with a national average for secondary schools of 14%. In other words, poor children are extremely rare in modern Grammar Schools. Recently published data, from the National Child Development Study for children born in 1953, has shown that those who attended comprehensive schools were in no way disadvantaged in their careers, compared with those who attended Grammar Schools. This finding is borne out in the little known fact that 14 of the present 25 members of the Shadow Cabinet, including the Leader of the Opposition, attended comprehensive schools. (Of the remaining 11, four went to secondary school when the system was still largely selective and one was educated abroad. The other six members were privately educated.)

If we didn't have selection by ability wouldn't we have selection by postcode as people who could afford it would move to be near the best schools?

This is a real problem in urban areas but it is one which has been created by government's obsession with the idea that "market forces" will bring about school improvement. Allowing parents to apply to any school they like has resulted in "desirable" schools being able, in effect, to select their pupils while "undesirable" schools are obliged to take "undesirable" pupils. In any market those with the most resources will be advantaged at the expense of the rest and this is what has happened in our cities.

It is perfectly feasible to develop policies which would enable urban comprehensive schools to have the kind of balanced intakes that are the norm in many areas of the country.

A significant development may be the growing practice among LAs of using a lottery for some of the places in its most popular schools, rather than allowing the most affluent parents to take over their catchment areas. The last government signalled that it was not opposed to such an approach, possibly indicating that at last it was coming to terms with the failure of "market forces" to raise standards at the "poorer" end of the spectrum. However, the new Coalition government has set itself on a course of increasing "diversity" and also of encouraging schools to become stand-alone "academies", free from LA control and more able to control their own intake. This policy is likely to worsen the situation in urban areas and strengthen existing hierarchies.

Motivation is crucial in children's learning. Although good teachers can and do inspire children, research shows that at least 80% of children's motivation at secondary school derives from factors outside the school's control. The two most critical are parental attitudes and the culture of the peer group. Both academic selection and "market forces" lead to hierarchies of schools, at the bottom of which are those which are filled with children rejected by the rest. In such schools parental attitudes and peer group culture are often both negative and lead to loss of motivation among the children.

Weren't there more state school pupils in Oxbridge in the old days of Grammar Schools?

No: the proportion of pupils who go from state schools to Oxbridge (and other "Russell Group" universities) has

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been fairly constant over many years, fluctuating at Oxbridge between 45% and 55%. Moreover this year (2011) Oxford is set to have its **highest ever** intake of students from state schools. Private school pupils account for 35% of all A-level results so it would be reasonable to expect around 65% of students at Oxbridge to have attended state schools. One Cambridge college, Emmanuel, has already achieved that figure and is currently considered to be Cambridge's most academically successful college. Also according to both the Higher Education Funding Council and recent research from the Sutton Trust, students who go to top universities from comprehensive schools obtain better degrees than those from other educational backgrounds, including state Grammar Schools.

Doesn't comprehensive education mean mixed ability teaching throughout the school?

No. Most schools "set" for some subjects where experience has shown it to be beneficial. Depending on their aptitude, children can be in different sets for different subjects, thereby experiencing learning at a pace which suits their individual needs. However, mixed ability teaching has been shown to be perfectly effective when practised by teachers who believe in it and, of course, it is universal in primary education.

Don't parents want selection?

Not the great majority. When parents have been specifically consulted by LAs wanting to re-introduce grammar schools, for example Solihull and Milton Keynes, there has been overwhelming opposition. In the London Borough of Sutton, selective schools have refused to consult parents on this issue. Extensive research into parental attitudes 'did not find evidence of a widespread demand for selection and the re-introduction of grammar schools' (Woods, Bagley and Clatter 1996). Only 27% of all parents supported selection in 1997. An Audit Commission poll of 1,029 parents of secondary age children, carried out in 1996, showed that only 14% of them favoured selective schools.

Will not more people choose private education if the remaining Grammar Schools are replaced by comprehensive schools?

In fact the percentage of secondary school pupils in England in private education dropped from 11% in 1965 to 8.6% in 1999 and is now down to 7%. This is not surprising because in the days of universal selection well off parents often chose private education if their children failed the 11+. All the evidence is that where a good comprehensive school is available the great majority of parents will use it.

Ending selection

Although the country has benefited enormously from the changeover to a comprehensive school system, CASE does not believe that the state education system is anywhere near perfect.

There are still too many failing schools, many of which are wrongly described as comprehensive. Most are unable, thanks to "market forces" and government's ambiguity about selection, to have the balanced intake that is essential for a comprehensive school to succeed; the rest, however they may style themselves, are Secondary Modern Schools within selective systems.

Despite the growing gap between the majority of successful schools and those which are failing, government stubbornly adheres to the obviously ineffective approach of "market forces".

In a properly organised comprehensive system, no school would be allowed to be overwhelmed by a disproportionate number of children from deprived and unstable backgrounds.

However, it is clear, that such a system cannot exist side by side with pockets of selection and so it is a matter of some urgency to end selection entirely, as has been done with no apparent detriment in Scotland and Wales.

Comprehensive education is also the norm in those countries which are regularly the most successful in the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA).

What you can do now

- Join CASE to campaign for a state education system that provides the best for all children.
- Speak up about your support for comprehensive education. Contact local and national politicians and the media.
- Find out from your Local Authority what the admission policies of your local secondary schools are and whether you have a local admissions forum (LAF). Object in any way you can to the weakening or, even, outright abolition of LAFs threatened by the 2011 Education Bill.
- Campaign to end selection if you live in an area where it still is practised. (See CASE campaign leaflets - Someone Ought to Do Something)
- Encourage your local councillors to object to proposals which will mean schools selecting their pupils.

Where you can find out more:

- CASE Website, www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk
- Comprehensive Future - info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk
- Affirming the Comprehensive Ideal - Pring and Walford, Falmer Press 1997
- Thirty Years On - Benn and Chitty, David Fulton. 1996
- The Grammar School Question - Crook, Power and Whitty, Institute of Education. 1999
- A Minute to Midnight - Francis Beckett, published in The New Statesman October 2002
- A Tribute to Caroline Benn: Essays in Education and Democracy - Melissa Benn and Clyde Chitty (eds), Continuum 2004
- Learning Without Limits - Susan Hart, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond and Donald McIntyre, Open University Press 2004
- The Death of the Comprehensive High School? - Barry M. Franklin and Gary McCulloch (eds), Palgrave Macmillan 2007
- The Common School and the Comprehensive Ideal - Mark Halstead and Graham Haydon (eds), Wiley-Blackwell 2008
- Education and Social Integration: Comprehensive Schooling in Europe - Susanne Wiborg, Palgrave Macmillan 2009
- The Pendulum Swings: Transforming School Reform - Bernard Barker, Trentham Books 2010

Feedback on this document is welcome. You can contact CASE by post c/o 98 Erlanger Road, London, SE14 5TH or by email at contact@campaignforstateeducation.org.uk

Our website is: www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk

CASE has been campaigning on education issues for over 40 years and relies entirely on membership fees to fund its activities.