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A (short) history of comprehensive education in England

Conference presentation

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This short presentation focuses on the history of comprehensive education in England. Inevitably, however, this also means outlining the system prior to the introduction of comprehensive schools.

Following the introduction of the 1944 Education Act, the so-called tripartite system was set up with grammar, technical (albeit that very few of these were set up), and secondary modern schools.

A small number of grammar schools – 163 – remain, catering for around 5% of the school population. And in addition since the 1980s, a significant minority of secondary schools have introduced selection of a proportion of pupils on the basis of aptitude/ability in a subject area. (It is particularly difficult to differentiate ‘aptitude’ and ‘ability’ as both rely on attainment at a particular point in time.) There is also long-standing selection by faith which in some cases is associated with social selection and, in effect, academic selection.

It is argued that a system with ‘hard’ academic selection by ability post-1944 has been replaced by a broadly comprehensive system with ‘softer’ selection by aptitude/ability in a subject area. The presentation also touches briefly on two key ideas: that of egalitarianism and that of elitism.

1944 Education Act

The 1944 Education Act set up a universal system of free, compulsory schooling from the age of five to 15. Schooling was provided by local authority and church schools. The Act allowed for the implementation of a ‘tripartite’ system of secondary education, with grammar schools for the most academically able, technical schools for those considered likely to benefit from a ‘technical’ education, and ‘secondary modern’ schools for the remainder.

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It is important to stress that the 1944 Act did not prescribe the tripartite system. Indeed there were some early experimental comprehensive schools, including for example, Walworth School set up in 1946.

In 1947, nearly 38% of pupils were in grammar schools.\(^4\) However, concerns were raised about the system during the 1950s and early 1960s (there was a Tory Government between 1951 and 1964).

- In the 1950s, the number of pupils leaving grammar schools at the age of 15 was increasing, with the majority being from working class backgrounds.\(^5\)

- There was no parity of esteem between grammar schools and other schools – grammar schools had better buildings and staff were more highly paid.\(^6\)

- And whilst grammar schools were popular, parents had little regard for secondary modern schools. ‘Most parents regarded non-grammar schools as dump schools’.\(^7\) But these were attended by the majority of pupils (around three-quarters).

- There were also major concerns about the ‘11-plus’ test which was taken by children at the end of primary school. This determined the sort of school children should go to.

- The ‘11-plus’ used intelligence tests, English and arithmetic tests. In some places interviews were carried out and in some local authorities headteacher recommendations were part of the process.

- There were concerns about intelligence tests which were associated with the eugenics movement\(^8\) – that intelligence was inherited, innate and fixed at a given point in time, all of which were subsequently discredited. For example, there was evidence coaching could improve test scores.

There were also concerns about the reliability and accuracy of intelligence tests.\(^9\) The concerns came from many different groups – in addition to concerns

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from parents there were concerns from academics. The work of Jean Floud and colleagues was particularly important. They found that nine out of ten children in the lowest socio-economic group did not gain a grammar school place.\textsuperscript{10}

In 1953 there was a Labour Party Manifesto commitment to abolish selection. And in 1954 the first purpose built London County Council comprehensive school was opened – Kidbrooke School in South East London.

Significant changes took place in the 1960s in England and also in some other European countries. In West Germany, which had introduced a tripartite system following the end of World War II, there was no change with the idea of ‘status maintenance’ prevailing. (However, intelligence tests are not used to determine the type of school children go to, rather teachers make recommendations.)\textsuperscript{11}

In Finland and Sweden, fully comprehensive systems emerged in 1960s. In Finland there was broad consensus surrounding the introduction of the 1968 Comprehensive School Act.\textsuperscript{12} In Sweden in 1962, the decision was taken to implement comprehensive education across the country. By 1972 comprehensivisation was fully implemented.\textsuperscript{13}

In England, there were pressures building up from all parts of the country, especially the urban conurbations in the North. There was a movement for change. In England, in 1962, 152 comprehensive schools were in operation.\textsuperscript{14} And by 1963 Ministry of Education officials estimated that 90 out of 163 local authorities in England and Wales were working on comprehensive reorganisation.\textsuperscript{15}

In the 1960s two pressure groups – the Confederation for the Advancement of State Education (CASE) and the Advisory Centre for Education were strongly supportive of comprehensive schools. ‘CASE was a well organised, serious, largely middle-class parental pressure group’\textsuperscript{16} – and very effective.

In 1964, with the election of a Labour government, there was a policy shift. There was a Manifesto commitment to ‘get rid of the segregation of children caused by 11-plus selection; secondary education will be reorganised on

comprehensive lines’. In January 1965, a confidential Memorandum from the Secretary of State of Education and Science, Michael Stewart went to the Cabinet.\textsuperscript{17} The following extracts are illuminating:

‘The present separatist system tends to divide society by preventing mutual understanding between those with greater and less academic attainment.’

‘It is now time to give a national lead.’

‘Most of country... developed on separatist lines without much consideration of merits, partly because it was administratively easiest, partly because it involved the least change from the past and partly because much educational opinion at the time favoured separatism.’

‘a positive decision that local authorities ought to “go comprehensive” is a new departure.’

‘I believe it to be right to require them to commence the reorganisation...’

Michael Stewart proposed a Circular and legislation: ‘Legislation is needed both to prevent absolute refusal by some local authorities and to satisfy all authorities that this is firmly and permanently national policy.’

This was not pursued however, and in July 1965 with Anthony Crosland as Secretary of State, Circular 10/65 was issued. Local education authorities were requested to submit plans for the reorganisation of secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines.

Some local authorities resisted and retained grammar schools. But there was a decisive shift in opinion in 1960s with comprehensives being supported by a majority of the population. Around 20% of the population were anti-comprehensive (roughly equivalent to proportion of pupils in grammar schools).\textsuperscript{18}

Egalitarian ideas were apparent within the Labour Party but were heavily criticised by some parts of the Conservative Party where elitist ideas

\textsuperscript{17} The National Archives CAB 129/120 C (65) 4 Comprehensive Secondary Education 14\textsuperscript{th} January 1965.

Indeed most Conservatives remained strongly committed to selective education. Others, however, were not.

Moving on to the 1970s, the election of a Conservative government in 1970 resulted in the withdrawal of the request for local authorities to submit plans for the introduction of comprehensive education; this was a ‘clear indication to local authorities to retain existing selective systems and to draw back from comprehensive reorganisation’.

Paradoxically, even though the majority of local authorities were by this time Conservative controlled, local authorities continued to submit proposals for comprehensive reorganisation, demonstrating the popularity of comprehensive schools and the power of local authorities at that time. By the early 1980s comprehensive education was almost universal.

However, the system was not similar across the country; local authorities had the power to decide what type of comprehensive system to introduce in their area and grammar schools were retained by some local authorities.

**Conservative Governments 1979-1997**

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) allowed for ‘independent’ city technology colleges to be established – predecessors to academies (with (in theory) capital costs being met by private sponsors and running costs met by the state). There was no political consensus surrounding the CTC programme, with antipathy to the idea from Labour local authorities that did not want CTCs in their area.

CTCs selected pupils. When asked in Parliament about selection at the first CTC (Kingshurst in Solihull), Kenneth Baker the Secretary of State for Education and Science replied:

> In the selection of children, primary teachers and head teachers will be asked to provide reports on candidates. A series of tests and interviews with parents will follow. The final selection will be carried out to ensure that the intake reflects the ability range of children of eligible age in the catchment area.

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For Giles Radice, Labour Shadow Secretary for Education and Science, CTCs were ‘socially divisive’. He expressed deep concern about cream-skimming and division within the inner cities.24

Also, following the 1988 ERA state funded schools could ‘opt out’ of local authority control and become ‘grant-maintained’ and funded by central government. These schools had more autonomy than others and were responsible for their own admissions.

The specialist schools programme was also established; this was designed to help state secondary schools to ‘specialise’ in particular subjects – in technology, science and mathematics modern foreign languages, and sports and arts.

The Conservative Government permitted comprehensive secondary schools to select a proportion of pupils on the basis of ability or aptitude in a subject. Towards the end of the Conservative Government in 1996 there was a policy shift towards grammar schools – with the return of elitist ideas:

In an interview with Gillian Shephard Secretary of State by John Humphrys on 28/4/96 the following comments were made:25

Shephard:
‘we believe that selective schools play an important part in that whole range but ... we do not envisage a return to a two-type of school system, namely grammar and secondary modern. That is not what we want because it would be returning to two kinds of schools and striking at the very heart of the diversity of a range of different sorts of schools which the government reforms have ... put in place since 1988.’

Humphrys:
‘If you have a system of Grammar Schools alongside a system a Comprehensive Schools, which by definition, presumably are going to remain non selective, you have two tiers?’

Shephard:
‘Yes you would...As part of that diversity, selective schools have an important place. What we don’t want to do is to force schools to go selective, but we do want to allow them to go selective if that is the wish of their Governors, of the parents, of the Heads and that would be the purpose of the White Paper that we put forward in June. But what I don’t expect is that it will result in a diminution of the diversity which exists in

25 Interview with Gillian Shephard: http://www.bbc.co.uk/otr/intext95-96/Shephard28.4.96.html
the system because I believe that that diversity, as it stands, is already very popular. We want to make it easier for those schools to go selective that wish to do so, and I don't imagine it will be all.’

The subsequent 1997 Conservative Party Manifesto\textsuperscript{26} stated:
- ‘We will continue to encourage the establishment of more specialist schools in technology, arts, languages and sport.
- We will allow all schools to select some of their pupils.
- We will help schools to become grammar schools in every major town where parents want that choice.’

**Labour Governments 1997-2010**

Labour introduced the School Standards and Framework Act in 1999. Grammar schools were designated as such under section 104 of the Act. Under the Act, no new grammar schools may be created but existing grammar schools may continue. No new selection by ability is permitted prior to sixth form other than for ‘banding’.

Schools or schools with partially selective arrangements which already had such arrangements in place during the 1997-98 school year are permitted to continue to use selection by ability, if unchanged since that school year. The specialist schools programme was re-launched in 1997. Schools could select a proportion of pupils on the basis of aptitude in a subject area.

In 2000, David Blunkett announced city academies. These were closely modelled on CTCs - unlike CTCs, academies would normally replace schools that were deemed to be failing by Ofsted. They were to have a special emphasis in at least one area of the curriculum (e.g. science and technology, languages, the arts or sport). They were to be all-ability schools with admissions policies agreed with the DfEE, which expected them to be broadly consistent with the Admissions Code (introduced by the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act) and, like specialist schools, permitted to select up to 10% of pupils on the basis of aptitude for the specialism.\textsuperscript{27}

Selection by aptitude in subject(s) increased from 3% of schools in 2001 to 5% in 2008. The percentage of schools selecting a proportion of pupils by ability was 1%.\textsuperscript{28}

\texttt{http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/1997/1997-conservative-manifesto.shtml}


Coalition Government 2010-2015

The 2010 Academies Act allowed schools to apply to convert to academies. Virtually all grammar schools have converted to academies. During this period there was an increase in the number of places available although the percentage remains similar (4.8% in 2010, 5.2% in 2015). As regards selection by aptitude in a subject area our own research found that by 2012, 6% of schools were selecting a proportion of pupils on the basis of aptitude in a subject area. The percentage selecting a proportion of pupils in the basis of ability remained at 1%.30

Conservative Government 2015-

A ‘satellite’ grammar school in Kent was approved in October 2015 by the then Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan.31 When Theresa May became Prime Minister in 2016, a Green Paper was issued. Proposals included the introduction of new grammar schools and selection by ability.

A key question is what do people think about grammar schools? In August 2016 soon after the expansion of grammar schools and selection by ability were first raised, a YouGov poll for the Times Educational Supplement found that 38 per cent believed that the government should build more grammar schools and encourage more schools to select by academic ability. 23 per cent believed existing grammar schools should be scrapped, while 17 per cent said the current selective schools should remain but no more should be created; another 22 per cent were ‘not sure’.32

According to a subsequent YouGov poll for the Times in September 2016, grammar schools were backed by 34 per cent of the population. Around 25 per cent wanted the government to close all grammar schools. A further 20 per cent said that the existing system should remain.

References

‘The poll reveals that Mrs. May’s initial efforts to win over the country with her plans do not seem to have worked. Support for grammars and academic selection was 38 per cent in early August, before the plans were set out.’

In conclusion, it is not clear what will happen at this stage. If comprehensive schools are permitted to convert to grammar schools, it is highly likely that some schools will wish to do so. And given the market in school-based education and the importance of league tables one can see why schools might decide to go down this route.

Notes
There are 163 existing grammar schools in England, educating approximately 167,000 pupils (5.2% of state secondary pupils). Ten local authorities (LAs) out of 151 with secondary schools have wholly selective education systems and a further 26 LAs have one or more grammar schools in their area. The South East has the highest proportion of pupils attending grammar schools; the North East has no grammar schools.

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