

The Challenges Facing Comprehensive Schools

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ABSTRACT This article is an edited version of a talk written for delivery at a conference organised to celebrate 50 years of Kidbrooke Comprehensive School with the overall theme 'The Comprehensive Ideal: taking it beyond the individual school'. Having honoured the pioneering work at Kidbrooke, Clyde Chitty then takes a close look at three key issues: the 'collegiate' scheme proposed by Tim Brighouse, the long-running debate about catchment areas, and the centrality of curriculum reform. The article concludes by arguing that we cannot allow the government to redefine the comprehensive ideal simply as a means of legitimising the introduction of yet more diversity into an already complex and unworkable secondary system.

Introduction

As I am sure is well known, considerable controversy surrounded the opening of Kidbrooke Comprehensive School in 1954. There was a major row when the Conservative Minister of Education Florence Horsbrugh took action at the last minute to prevent the then London County Council (LCC) closing the Eltham Hill Girls' Grammar School and transferring these 'selected' pupils to the new Kidbrooke School. This obviously meant that London's first purpose-built comprehensive school was *not* as 'comprehensive' as it might have been.

Florence Horsbrugh's successor, Sir David Eccles, shortly after taking office late in 1954, was anxious to reassure the grammar school lobby that comprehensive reorganisation was not acceptable to the Conservative Party. He made his position quite clear when he said in a speech:

One has to choose between justice and equality, for it is impossible to apply both principles at once. Those who support comprehensive schools prefer equality. Her Majesty's present Government prefer justice. My colleagues and I will never allow local authorities to assassinate the grammar schools.

Now, fifty years later, that's probably a sentiment to which most Conservative and New Labour politicians would subscribe!

In the early days, there were many stories circulating about the School's first Headteacher, (Dame) Mary (Molly) Green, many of them doubtless apocryphal. We were told, for example, either that she arrived at school each day in a chauffeur-driven car, or that, having driven herself to school, she

handed her keys on arrival to the school caretaker or one of his ground staff for the car to be parked safely! It seems this *second* version is actually the correct one. Dame Mary died aged 90 on 19 April 2004, and according to an obituary by Roy Hattersley which appeared in *The Guardian* four days later: 'during the 1950s and 1960s, Molly Green would drive on to the forecourt of Kidbrooke Comprehensive School and hand the car keys to the school keeper. Parking was not one of the headmistress's (sic) duties.' As Lord Hattersley also observed: 'she had previously been headmistress of Colston's Girls' School in Bristol, and much of the Girls' Public Day School Trust style and manner never faded'.

It is now fashionable to deride the 1960s as wildly idealist and culturally aberrant. But for those of us involved with comprehensive schooling, it was a time of real excitement and genuine achievement. We believed that eleven-plus selection was totally discredited and that the comprehensive school was here to stay.

For reasons very much associated with my own teaching experience in London and Leicestershire, I still tend to be wedded to the idea of the free-standing, autonomous comprehensive school. But I realise that this is a concept that is rapidly going out of fashion! Hence the title of this Conference.

On 28 September 2002, Professor Tim Brighouse gave the first Brian Simon *FORUM* Memorial Lecture in which he argued for a new collegiate framework which acknowledges that secondary education involves belonging to a least *two* institutions: the school and the collegiate to which it is attached. Is this the new model for the future?

What Does the Collegiate Concept Mean?

The collegiate framework might sound attractive in theory; but what are the implications for individual schools? It seems clear that any idea of partnership can cover a wide variety of schemes.

In an article published in *The Times Educational Supplement* on 4 October 2002, Professor Brighouse outlined the details of one, albeit somewhat limited, version of his collegiate concept. At the age of eleven, choice of secondary education would indeed involve both a school and a collegiate. Modest timetable alignment would ensure three essentials:

- some key staff, such as heads of department, would be 'free' at the same time each week, and all staff would share five 'professional development' days;
- three or four agreed 'collegiate' days or weeks would allow intensive in-depth shared learning for pupils belonging to the collegiate;
- the time both *before* and *after* school could form the basis of the collegiate curriculum, making maximum use of advances in the key learning and communication technologies.

On 29 March 2005, Secretary of State Ruth Kelly gave a talk with the title 'From Comprehensive Schools to Comprehensive Education', as part of a Fabian Society Lecture Series: 'Life Chances: The Positive Agenda'. And she

boldly proclaimed right at the outset: 'Yesterday's education system is not necessarily suited to today's world'. Our aims for the future demand our 'moving beyond just having comprehensive schools to having a genuinely comprehensive education system'.

Reviewing this Speech in the June 2005 number of *Education Journal* (Issue 86, pp.18-19), Max Morris argued that this appeared to be 'a merely tautologous pronouncement'. For, in his words, 'a truly comprehensive system must surely mean, if it means anything, the completion of the incomplete system of comprehensive schools we now have by removing all forms of selection, including those for grammar schools.'

Ms Kelly repeated her opening motif later in her Speech. She said: 'I want our education system to complete a shift from one where 'comprehensive schools' have been the almost exclusive focus, to one where we provide 'a genuine comprehensive education'. ... The comprehensive ideal was and remains powerful and inspiring. ... The challenge is to reinterpret this idea in the light of the challenges of today.' All rather vague and meaningless – in a speech described by Max Morris as 'page after page of rather banal platitudes: the stock-in-trade of every educational blatherer'.

To be fair to the Secretary of State, she did finally get round to explaining what 'fashioning a truly comprehensive education system' actually entailed; but it was hardly impressive or ground-breaking stuff.

Apparently, a culture of 'strong, autonomous institutions' had to be replaced by one which recognised the value of 'carefully developed interdependence'. But the only examples given concerned the implementation of 14-19 reforms and the management of behaviour policies.

The Issue of Catchment Areas

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, comprehensive schools faced two very real problems: the continued existence of a large number of grammar schools and a lack of general agreement as to what a comprehensive school was meant to be. If we concentrate on the second of these two problems, we have to accept that the issue of defining viable catchment areas has always aroused considerable controversy, particularly in urban areas.

Writing in the journal *Comprehensive Education* in 1966, Brian Simon pointed out that:

It is not yet fully understood that the transition to comprehensive education – where genuine comprehensive systems are being established – inevitably means that the school systems that develop will be neighbourhood systems, the schools themselves neighbourhood schools.

Circular 144, published back in June 1947, had, after all, defined a comprehensive school as 'one which is intended to cater for all the children in a given area, without an organisation in three sides.'

Since the vast majority of the nation's children already attended neighbourhood schools, at both the primary and secondary stage, this was hardly a *revolutionary* concept; but it was seized upon by opponents of the comprehensive reform as a main line of attack. The argument was that since most comprehensive schools, particularly in large cities, drew on strictly defined localities, they contrasted strongly with selective grammar schools which took children from every social class. In his book *Education and Leadership*, published in 1951, Eric James, the then High Master of Manchester Grammar School, argued that:

We must retain the grammar schools, for nothing could accentuate class divisions more effectively than comprehensive schools drawing on limited localities, where the whole tone and prestige of the school is completely coloured by the social status of the particular neighbourhood, as American experience clearly shows.

It was in response to this sort of argument that many comprehensive campaigners began to argue that the new schools must be socially mixed and thereby play a significant role in the creation of a more cohesive and harmonious society. Like Brian Simon, I was never among those who argued that a common secondary school had to be *socially* comprehensive; but there is no doubt that the concept of the 'social mix' proved very attractive to many reformers on the Left.

The situation we now face is far more complex than anything envisaged by politicians and educationists in the 1960s. And whatever one's views about the way a school's catchment area should be defined, it cannot be denied that the comprehensive movement has found it very difficult to cope with the recent emphasis on choice and diversity. One of the main arguments that can be levelled against the new city academies concerns the effect they have on the admissions policies of neighbouring secondary schools.

So the question of admissions and catchment areas is still a major problem today, and, in England at least, parents are confronted with a bewildering variety of secondary schools to choose from. Not that this is necessarily the right way of putting it; since in a market-orientated system, *schools usually choose parents*, not the other way around.

I must admit I remain unconvinced that the collegiate model will make any real difference to the whole question of parental preference. Middle-class parents will still opt for the 'successful' schools boasting an élite of pupils drawn from the 'best' eleven-year-old performers in standardised tests. Nor can I see why independent schools or selective schools or the 'top' comprehensives would wish to enter into partnership with other schools. Apart from any other considerations, no school would wish to sacrifice its position in the all-important league tables based on GCSE results – unless, of course, we moved over to a system of league tables of 'collegiates'.

At the same time, despite my personal reservations about the collegiate model, I can at least appreciate that there are real benefits to be derived from

the idea of secondary schools *of a similar status*, working closely together, particularly taking into account the diminishing role of LEAs.

Curriculum Issues

Moving on to a further important issue, it is possible to argue that in the early days of reorganisation, we paid insufficient attention to the need for major curriculum reform.

A real area of concern focussed on the whole issue of the 14 to 19 curriculum and related qualifications; and problems here were not solved by the curriculum proposals for older students in the 1988 Education Reform Act.

There are many who now feel that the present Government has thrown away a golden opportunity to reform the structure of post-16 qualifications. It was, after all, the Labour Government itself which launched a major review of qualifications for older students in January 2003, to be carried out by Mike Tomlinson, a former Chief Inspector of Schools. When the Final Report of the Working Group was published in October 2004, it recommended the introduction of a broad 'baccalaureate-style' diploma designed to replace or subsume GCSEs and A Levels, improve parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses and broaden access to higher education. Unfortunately, the White Paper on the 14 to 19 curriculum, *14-19 Education and Skills*, published by Ruth Kelly in February this year, rejected the Tomlinson Report's key proposal for a four-tier overarching diploma embracing all academic and vocational qualifications and opted instead to retain GCSEs and A Levels largely in their present form. Its key proposal was to replace the existing 'alphabet soup' of around 3,500 separate vocational qualifications with a three-tier system of 'specialised diplomas' in 14 occupational areas or 'specialised learning lines'.

Conclusion

Things have, of course, moved on since the 1960s. We obviously have to accept that the concept of 'inclusion' is not just about class, but must also embrace issues of race, gender, sexuality and disability. At the same time, we cannot allow the Government to redefine the comprehensive ideal simply as a means of legitimising the introduction of yet more diversity into an already complex and unworkable secondary system.

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