
Diversity and Choice: the spin doctor's route to selection

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ABSTRACT This article, based on a talk given by the author at the Education Conference held at the Institute of Education, University of London, on 25 March, argues that we should be wary about the new centre-ground consensus on education and keep a broader vision in mind for the future of comprehensive education in the United Kingdom.

Beware Modern Political Language

I would like to start by expressing my distrust at modern political language. It is a feature of modern mass media-driven centre-ground consensus politics that absolutely everyone wants the absolute best for everyone else. So, in education, every mainstream politician now agrees that selection is terribly wrong, that every child matters, that we need to narrow the gap between private and state schools. Which is great.

When I'm in an optimistic mood, I see these developments as a sign of how far we have come – and certainly we have, if you compare modern political language with the more blatant elitism of the post-war era. But, in another way, it's a sign of how meaningless and obscuring, rather than clarifying, language itself has now become in educational politics.

Consider the Government's position on the recent White Paper Education Bill – how the underpinning theme has been posed by the Government as 'a radical overhaul of structures' to one audience, as 'a boost for the urban poor' to others. Even the most committed 'government watcher' has problems working out what the basic thrust of this Bill – its *real point* – really is. This was always Blairism's so-called 'genius' and I would now argue its fatal weakness: confusion and vagueness as to what New Labour really does represent, what it really wants to change.

So I would argue that the *real* argument in education today is much simpler than obfuscating language suggests and needs to be restated over and

over again. It is between those who want to select and divide and separate children by so-called 'ability', class, by ethnic background or by faith at the age of eleven, whether they call that grammar-school selection or they use more obfuscatory language like providing choice, ethos and specialism. And, on the other side, those who are committed to a non-selective system based on the neighbourhood principles, that aims to educate all our children together. In other words, *genuine* comprehensives versus 'diversity and choice', the spin doctors' slogan to support the subtle selectors.

A second equally important divide is also emerging: between those who want a publicly-funded publicly-accountable system, and those who want to mix public money with private control and influence and lose democratic links in the process.

A Word on Diversity and Choice

I come from a proud comprehensive tradition. I went to a local comprehensive school. My children go to local schools. My mother, Caroline Benn, was a tenacious and successful comprehensive campaigner. But what brought me into this debate now, was – as is so often the case with politics – experience. As a parent of children in local schools, watching the secondary transfer process work with *real* children in a *real* area, it took me some time – years – to grasp the very subtle ways in which children are currently 'sorted' into different schools. Slowly I perceived what diversity and choice really mean – a clear hierarchy of local schools. At the top the private schools, then the grammars and some of the faith-based comprehensives, which operate some quite blatant forms of selection, then the various kinds of comprehensives that are inevitably affected by the area in which they find themselves. Of course, we have always had forms of diversity and choice – but we are also *supposed* to have a comprehensive system. What made me angry was to see the process by which so many families, mainly *middle-class* families – families who were happy to have a 'comprehensive' primary education – were provided with 'escape routes' to get out of the local school at secondary level. Then what made me even angrier was seeing the local school denigrated for not being good enough.

The comprehensive school always gets it in the neck, even though most of these schools are doing a brilliant job, even though the problem with so many of them is not that they are comprehensive but, stripped of many high-performing 'motivated' children, they are not comprehensive enough. And, of course, as we all know, selection is happening all over the country, as I have learned over the past few months. Whether you're talking about Grimsby, Bristol, Southend or Birmingham, in every area of the country, continuing forms of selection deform the educational landscape, making the tasks of genuinely non-selective local schools even harder. And we all knew, didn't we, that at the heart of government they have never really believed in the comprehensive idea.

How the Bill Didn't Quite Work out as Tony Wanted

This Bill was supposed to set diversity and choice in stone. We had a government finally bold enough to deal a death blow to the comprehensive vision of non-selective fair-admission local schools. Interestingly, it hasn't quite worked out like that – because of this little problem called the Labour Party. But I think this Bill has really backfired on the Government and the Government has been forced to listen to its critics:

- important concessions *have* been reached on admissions.
- the arrogant proscription on no more 'community' schools has had to be changed, although it still makes me angry to see that the Secretary of State will have to consent to new community schools.
- there's a real fight back on the eleven-plus – now might, in fact, be the time to move on getting rid of the eleven-plus where it does still exist. The politicians have no answer to this. If the eleven-plus is wrong, why does it still exist in so many different authorities?
- there's growing unease about the role of the private sector in schools – ever more fuelled by everything from bad news on the academy programme to the 'loans for peerages' scandal.

A Return to Some Founding Principles

As the Bill goes through Parliament over the next few months, I want us to remember some of the bigger picture principles, as a backdrop to that parliamentary debate. I want us to hold on to what the original comprehensive ideal was about:

1. The Importance of Educating Our Children Together

Beware talk about 'comprehensive systems', a 'comprehensive approach', 'federations of schools'. I recently did a debate with Blair's biographer Anthony Seldon who seemed very persuasive and reasonable in finding ways to bring together the private schools and less fortunate local schools. Again, beware. The comprehensive ideal is *not* about Eton lending the local comprehensive its playing fields. It is about every school representing the true mix in its neighbourhood. Let me say it here – there is no better education for a child – any child – whatever their social background, their so-called 'ability' – than a genuine local school. It enriches children's understanding of themselves, their class, ethnic, religious, national, political origins; they see themselves in their true context. But without a genuine mix, you either have the unfairness of struggling schools . . . or at the other end you have the elite experiences of the private institutions that select by virtue of family wealth – and so-called academic ability. And I would argue, that's not a genuine education either.

2. Keeping the Neighbourhood Principle – and the Local Democratic Link

No one denies there can be real questions, genuine problems, thrown up by neighbourhoods determining the character of local schools. The media love to talk about selection by post code, but never talk about other forms of selection: by cheque book, dance class or church attendance. Nevertheless, I still think that the neighbourhood school – the local model – is the potentially fairest system we have. Instead of throwing it out, we should be addressing some of the issues that arise in relations to local schools, balancing intakes and boosting their achievements.

How can the comprehensive principle be served by private interests running our schools – which could – among other ill effects – fatally sever the links between school and community and undermine the provision of education and fairness. Only a public-oriented service, thinking of the interests of every child, will be able to think about the children that everyone else wants to forget. The link between school governance and the community, the genuine accountability that derives from elected parent governors and school decisions, cannot be underestimated. It seems odd to be fighting for this vital bit of local democracy when hundreds and thousands have died in the last three years fighting for democracy in Iraq.

3. For Years it Has been Standards Not Structures.

But what do we mean by Standards? We really need to keep open a debate on a much broader, more human vision of education – a sense of a richer curriculum – not governed by the test. We need real diversity within our schools, choice over the curriculum and freedom from its deadening constraints. I am a novice here, but there's something deadening happening in our curriculum – our children are being taken through so many hoops in order to meet league table targets – set against the private and selective sector which is so much more able to cram for exams.

It is important to hold on to this dream, in this very arid, technocratic, centre-ground period of political history – the dream of the high-quality neighbourhood school, well supported by the Political Centre, but free to develop the diverse talents of its students – reaching high academic standards, yes, but aiming to do so much more than that. And giving this chance to *every* child whatever their family or origin. For all the talk of bills, reading, codes and tests, let's not lose touch with what it's all about: providing our children with the means to be really thoughtful, aware, enriched citizens.

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