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A Rural Comprehensive Forty Years On

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ABSTRACT Drawing on a lengthy link with a particular school together with wider experience of work in the secondary sector, an argument is made for supporting all-ability, neighbourhood schools with strong community links. Rather than the endless centrally imposed tinkering as each new governmental regime produces its' latest 'big idea'; it is important to recognise that the development of schools should be a steady, organic process. Clearly given the great differences in catchment areas support must reflect need but the principle of neighbourhood community schooling should be paramount.

When I was invited to join the editorial board of *FORUM* in the mid 1960s I was teaching in a small rural comprehensive school in west Dorset. Since 1994 I have been a governor at this same school so have had varying levels of contact with it for more than four decades. The school opened in January 1963 in new buildings on the outskirts of a small market town. Although early planning intentions were probably for a bi-lateral school, the comprehensive movement was gaining momentum and in the final stages all preparations were for an all-ability comprehensive with strong community links serving a large rural catchment area. As was often the case at that time, the school was formed from the amalgamation of existing schools: a small, ancient foundation grammar school with a strong boarding tradition and a number of all-age schools.

The head, Jack Walton, was appointed in 1962 with time to carry out final planning. Of course, many of the existing staff remained but some new staff with a commitment to comprehensive principles were appointed. I have long held the view that such a blend of teachers rooted in the area with some 'fresh blood' can make for an excellent start. Undoubtedly Jack Walton was a quite remarkable leader and he had the school buzzing with activity in no time. Within a couple of years the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) journal *WHERE* was describing the school as one of the best, if not the best, rural comprehensive in the country.

Jack Walton was my link to *FORUM*. The journal was then a PSW publication, having been formed in 1958 by Leicester lecturers Robin Pedley and Brian Simon, and Jack Walton, who was then a head of department in the Midlands. Each in his own way made a remarkable contribution to the early stages of the comprehensive movement. It was Brian Simon, however, who ensured that *FORUM* maintained its high reputation in the field of 5 to 19 comprehensive education across several decades while it remained a PSW publication.

Like most of my generation, I started out in 1958 as a teacher in the two-tier system – in my case a boys' grammar in Birmingham. The post-war bulge had just reached secondary schools so there was a need to recruit new teachers – at a time of National Service teaching was, for a time, a reserved occupation. This was fortunate because instead of joining a very traditional staff room as an individual or a small number of new recruits to be more easily absorbed into the traditional processes there was a significant cohort who could and did question what was going on.

The grammar school had six streams formed first from the 11-plus results, then modified by the results of examinations in all subjects at the end of the autumn and summer terms. It was not unusual following the first examination for there to be substantial re-ordering, with some pupils moving from F to A or the other way. By the end of the second year, however, the groups were firmly established and by and large pupils were performing to expectation. Since all pupils had passed the 11-plus and were credited with an IQ of 115 or above it might have been reasonable to assume that all were destined for success at O and A levels. Unfortunately this was not the case. I still wince over memories of the hectoring and dismissive style adopted by some of my colleagues towards the D, E and F streams. They were written off and even the Bs and Cs didn't escape entirely. Eventually the lower streams performed at the gloomily predicted levels. In essence the A stream pupils had a high O level success rate, though the practice of sitting their exams in the fourth year was questionable as few were able to maintain the momentum over a three-year sixth form course. The B stream pupils did fairly well, the C stream pupils rather patchily and the D, E and F pupils achieved very little. From a very carefully selected 25 per cent entry to grammar school only about a third went on to be successful by the criteria of the time. That would be about 10 per cent of the school population. That was very wasteful and there had to be a better way. The emerging comprehensives with their ethos of developing each individual to the best of his or her ability seemed the right answer to a highly divisive and often destructive system.

On learning of my appointment to a rural comprehensive many of my grammar school colleagues expressed great surprise. Yet the Birmingham school was itself soon to go co-educational, comprehensive and be led by one of the country's first black heads – and a very distinguished head too. In many ways the role of a grammar school teacher was quite straightforward. Pastoral work and extra-curricular activity (apart from games) were minimal. There was,

however, a grindingly heavy load of marking and examining, and classes by today's standards were large. You were expected to conform and to do things as they had always been done. During my five years there was no discussion on teaching methods, good practice or how we might improve our methods. Any in-service training was done in my own time and at my own expense.

In west Dorset it was such a relief to work in an environment where ideas were shared and discussed. We were quickly looking at best practice, examining mixed-ability teaching, introducing a project week – then pioneering, now *de rigueur* – and generally it was a very stimulating environment in which to work. The result was a happy school with an amazing range of activities and where teachers and students worked well together.

What of the small west Dorset comprehensive today? It still serves the same large rural catchment area. Student numbers are about the same. The buildings, however, are very different. The core of the 1963 buildings remains but some excellent additions and adaptations have been made over the years. A well-designed and much-needed science block was added in the 1990s. Governors were able to part fund this, and later the addition of a library resource centre, by using foundation funds. More recently, with Technology status came upgraded technology facilities, additional classrooms and specialist facilities together with considerable remodelling. A fine sports hall is the latest addition and comes after years of campaigning. A visitor today who knew the original buildings would be amazed at the improvements and recognise the great effort that has been made to ensure facilities that are fit for purpose. Especially important when 'down the road' a neighbouring school has had a complete set of new buildings through the Private Finance Initiative.

A returning teacher would find a huge range of human resource improvements. Gone is the lone school secretary, now replaced by a secretariat dealing with reception, routine student and staff issues and, of course, administrative and financial matters. No longer is the Banda in the corner of the staff room to deal with the reprographic needs of teachers; but instead a sophisticated reprographic department. A pastoral system provides for student welfare. A team of teaching assistants and support staff helps in a variety of ways, especially with special needs provision. The premises, grounds and catering needs are managed by teams which are part of the whole enterprise. Computers have become absolutely essential for both day-to-day administration and in the classroom. There is good provision of hardware with dedicated areas and technical support. Teachers have embraced and exploited this technical advance with enthusiasm.

My overall impression of the school is of dedicated and hardworking teachers getting on with the job. Despite the blizzard of new initiatives and directives, the hectoring style, the league tables, targets, heavy-handed inspections often devoid of any constructive follow-up and the endless testing and examining there is excellent work and effective learning taking place in a good atmosphere. The head and his Senior Management Team colleagues are abreast of the demands made on them so the school is well led. Relationships

are good, there is a calm, pleasant atmosphere and a great deal is going on. Had my children been old enough I would have been happy for them to attend the school in the 1960s and I would feel the same now for my grandchildren. It is a highly personal and subjective judgement but my view is that it was a good school in the 1960s and remains so today. Whilst in many ways the larger educational world has changed out of all recognition and there is immense pressure on schools, judged by what is going on in the classroom and the wider school activities, relationships are excellent, good practice abounds and outcomes are very satisfactory.

An army of people is now employed across the country to monitor and assess what is going on in schools. A great mass of statistical information is available on each school. How much this new industry affects or informs parental decisions and concerns is at the very least open to question.

At a recent meeting of governors the curriculum deputy gave a presentation on the future of the 14-19 curriculum. Not only was it one of the best contributions I have heard in recent times but it also gave hope of a better future for the management and delivery of the curriculum. A neighbour, also an ex-teacher, turned to me and said, 'where have I heard that before'. It was very like the curriculum discussions of years ago. The inspection service also seems to want to move away from the blunt, sometimes brutal and counter-productive process to something, which whilst still rigorous, might be considered more constructive and with a lighter touch. So perhaps we are beginning to move again in the right direction.

For a number of years in west Dorset post-16 provision has been enhanced by working as a joint sixth form with the neighbouring comprehensive. Teaching takes place on both sites. Further links are being forged with further education providers to widen the range of courses available, especially vocational. Such strategies enhance provision but do not weaken the crucial concept of being a neighbourhood school.

Dorset is a favoured environment, though it would be a mistake to assume there are no problems. Schools in our larger urban areas often work under particular and immense pressures but even here the principle of ensuring a really good neighbourhood school applies. Had governments over the last forty years stuck firmly to the principle of neighbourhood schooling and invested appropriately to support those in greater need I am sure the national picture would be much healthier. Building on best practice, creating healthy schools rooted in and part of their community is a steady process easily upset, even destroyed by some of the 'sticking plaster' measures handed down from the centre. Those who believe that every community deserves a good school will be bitterly disappointed by some of the current government's initiatives that have damaged rather than enhanced the educational system. Unwilling or unable to examine critically their own actions, they are certainly quick enough to apportion blame elsewhere. My example of a rural comprehensive may be of only one school but there are hundreds like it and it shows what can be done

when the principle of ensuring the best possible outcomes for both the young people and the community in general is followed.

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