FORUM
Volume 51, Number 1, 2009
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Us and Them: a history of pupil grouping policies in England's schools

DEREK GILLARD

ABSTRACT The selection of children in England's schools for different types of education can be seen operating at three levels: between schools, within schools and within classes. This article deals mainly with the second – the allocation of pupils to classes – but it also refers to selection for secondary education and to the grouping of pupils within classes because decisions at all three levels are interlinked. It describes the ways in which pupils have been allocated to teaching groups since the 1860s, noting relevant sections of government reports and white papers, the arguments made by educationists, and the findings of research projects.

Mass Education and Social Class (up to 1900)

Human beings have always been obsessed with labelling one another. Skin colour, nationality, religion, gender, sexuality, political allegiance – all have been used to divide 'us' from 'them'. In England, the most divisive and damaging of such criteria historically has been social class. The division of the population into upper, middle and lower (or working) class has bedevilled English society for centuries.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the very idea that the mass of the population should learn to read was seen as 'a foolhardy and potentially dangerous enterprise' (Chitty, 2007, p. 12), a view which was prevalent well into the nineteenth century. In a notorious speech attacking the Parochial Schools Bill, for example, Tory MP Davies Giddy, declared that 'giving education to the labouring classes of the poor' would 'teach them to despise their lot in life' and make them 'factious and refractory'. (Hansard, House of Commons, Vol. 9, Col. 798, 13 July 1807, quoted in Chitty, 2007, p. 15-16)

When it finally became clear, with the development of industry, commerce and international trade, that the country needed an education system which

catered for all, those who were horrified at the prospect of children of different classes being educated together sought to ensure that the school system itself was clearly divided on class lines. Thus three commissions produced reports, each relating to educational provision for a particular social class:

> the Clarendon Report (1864) and the 1868 Public Schools Act focused on the nine 'great' public schools for the upper class;
>
> the Taunton Report (1868) and the Act which followed it in 1869 dealt with separate institutions for the middle classes; and
>
> the Newcastle Report (1861) and the 1870 Elementary Education Act (the Forster Act) sought to provide a basic education for the working class.

The Forster Act introduced universal education for all children aged 5-13. It was restricted in scope and the elementary education it offered was limited and inferior, but it was, nonetheless, 'a truly radical measure in that it laid the foundations of a universal system of elementary schools for the working class' (Chitty, 2007, p. 16)

Streaming and setting were unknown at this time. From 1862 children in elementary schools were allocated to classes on the basis of 'standards'. The standard was the level the average child was expected to have reached at the end of a year's work and most children were expected to progress at one standard a year. Schools were financed under the system of 'payment by results' up to – but not beyond – Standard VI.

Payment by results ended in 1898, but the notion of standards regulating promotion through the school survived because the 1902 Education Act introduced a system of junior scholarships under which 'free places' in grammar schools were offered to the most able children. Children were encouraged to progress quickly through the standards so as to have a better chance in the scholarship examination at the age of ten or eleven. Unfortunately, 'accelerated promotion for some was counterbalanced by delayed promotion for others who repeated the same work year after year. Some left from Standard II or III. Practice had not made perfect.' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 789)

Notions of 'Intelligence' (1900-1945)

As the state system of education developed and expanded, those who still objected to the idea of working class children being educated at all, and especially to the notion of children of different classes being educated together, looked around for other ways of segregating children. A number of developments came to their aid. First, psychologists, whose science was gaining in respect and influence, warned that having too wide an age span in one class was undesirable, and that the grouping of children by chronological age produced fewer learning problems. Second, Binet's work on intelligence and

Burt's on backwardness 'encouraged the view that ability could be measured and used as a basis for grouping and that less able pupils in particular needed to be given special treatment'. (Kelly, 1978, pp. 7-8) And third, the supporters of 'eugenics' (a term coined by the explorer Francis Galton in the 1880s for the study of the use of selective breeding to improve the innate quality of the human race) warned of the dire consequences of 'the spread of a physically degenerate population in the cities' (Chitty, 2007, p. 45), especially immigrants and the working class. These three developments provided the excuse for segregating children on the basis of 'intelligence'.

The idea that each child had a fixed level of 'innate intelligence' which could be measured and presented as an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score was widely promoted, most notably by psychologist Cyril Burt, who did more than anyone to advocate the widespread use of IQ tests 'for the purpose of pinning permanent labels on schoolchildren at the age of eleven' (Chitty, 2007, p. 66). Burt provided much of the theory on which the Hadow Reports were based and was to wield enormous influence over many years – through the 1938 Spens Report to the structure of the secondary education system in the wake of the 1944 Education Act.

Four of the six Hadow Reports published between 1923 and 1933 are relevant here: *Psychological Tests of Educable Capacity* (1924), *The Education of the Adolescent* (1926), *The Primary School* (1931) and *Infant and Nursery Schools* (1933).

The 1924 report began by reviewing the available tests, including 'the celebrated Binet-Simon Scale' which, with its various modifications, had been used extensively since about 1910 'as an aid to the discovery and special treatment of mentally defective and subnormal children, and to a less degree of supernormal children'. It had also been used as an aid 'for internal classification in elementary and special schools, and to a very much smaller extent in secondary schools'. (Hadow, 1924, Ch 2 §57)

Hadow warned of the limitations of such tests. 'The so-called 'mental ratios' (intelligence quotients) of individual children obtained by the application of such tests represent a succinct and highly abstract method of presenting the results ... the mental ratio of any individual child should always be used with discretion and in association with the information available from other sources' (Hadow, 1924, Ch 3 §93 para 28).

In fact, the members of the Hadow committee were clearly not entirely impressed with the measurement of 'intelligence' for the purpose of selection at 11, the age at which they were proposing that all children would transfer from primary to secondary schools. In their 1926 report they warned that it was 'difficult to forecast how a child at the age of 11+ is likely to develop'. As a result, even when Free Place Examinations were conducted 'with the greatest care' some of the pupils who failed went on to show 'a real capacity for studies leading up to the First School Examination'. The committee therefore urged that 'every effort should be made to facilitate the transfer of such pupils to Secondary Schools' (Hadow, 1926, Ch 7 §156).

Neither were they convinced that intelligence was entirely a matter of heredity. In their 1931 report they noted 'a marked correspondence between the distribution of poverty and the distribution of educational retardation'. They concluded that 'in the past, eugenic and biometric investigators have rightly emphasised the effects of heredity; but there is now an increasing tendency to believe that they have underestimated the effects of environment' (Hadow, 1931, Ch 3 §48).

On the issue of selection for secondary education, the committee declared that it would be necessary 'to discover in each case the type most suitable to a child's abilities and interests', and that for this purpose 'a written examination should be held, and also, wherever possible, an oral examination'. Psychological tests, they suggested, might be useful 'in dealing with borderline cases, or where a discrepancy between the result of the written examination and the teacher's estimate of proficiency has been observed' (Hadow, 1926, Ch 7 para 157).

The committee recommended that children below the age of 11 should be 'classified' according to their 'natural gifts and abilities'. In large primary schools, therefore, there should be a 'triple track system of organisation, viz. a series of 'A' classes or groups for the bright children, and a series of smaller 'C' classes or groups to include retarded children, both series being parallel to the ordinary series of 'B' classes or groups for the average children'. (Hadow 1931 Ch 5 §66) This policy was endorsed by the Board of Education in its *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers* and was recommended for the 'multilateral' (i.e. comprehensive) school in the Spens Report on *Secondary education* in 1938. 'The ideology behind this was, of course, the ideology of the day which led to the organisation of secondary education itself as well as the grouping of pupils in classes along selective lines' (Kelly, 1978, p. 8).

Hadow did, however, warn against 'a rigid classification of the entrants from the infant school' (Hadow, 1931, Ch 5 §66) and stressed the importance of easy transfer of children between the A, B and C classes. Unfortunately, as Plowden would later note, 'these reservations tended to be forgotten. Grading by ability, in one form or another, became almost universal in all but the smallest schools' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 791).

The Hadow committee stressed the importance of group and individual work, especially in small schools, quoting a memorandum from the Education Section of the British Psychological Society: 'The diversity in age and attainment, together with lack of opportunity for group classification, makes flexible and individual methods essential, if good work is to be done. A well-organised arrangement of individual work in definite study together with abundant opportunities for group activity in the directions where such activity is really fruitful is particularly important in the rural school' (Hadow, 1931, Ch 5 §67).

And they noted that a combination of setting (though they didn't use that term) and individual work was being practised in some small rural schools with 'good results' (Hadow, 1931, Ch 5 §67).

The committee concluded by reiterating their support for streaming. 'Older children differ far more widely in intellectual capacity than younger children. It would, therefore, seem that while at the infant stage children may be grouped together without much regard to varying degrees of mental endowment, by the age of ten pupils in a single age group should be classified in several sections' (Hadow, 1931, Ch 11 Recommendation 19).

The Committee's final report (1933) supported the classification of children in infant and nursery schools by age, but noted that many schools had experimented with vertical classification. This system 'obviously calls for special gifts in the teacher, but it 'works''. (Hadow, 1933, Ch 6 §99).

Many of Hadow's recommendations were implemented, though some – nationwide provision of primary schools, for example – took many years. Undoubtedly, two of the most significant outcomes were the introduction and widespread use of streaming within schools and a much greater emphasis on selection procedures at the age of eleven, both based on measurements of attainment or 'intelligence'.

The theory which underpinned the Hadow Reports also informed the 1938 Spens Report on *Secondary education with special reference to grammar schools and technical high schools*. This recommended that there should be three types of secondary school – modern schools, grammar schools and technical high schools (Spens, 1938, Ch 9 §22) – for which children would be selected at the age of 11.

The Spens committee did argue that 'many benefits might accrue if children above the age of 11 were educated together in multilateral [i.e. comprehensive] schools, since the transfer of pupils at various ages to courses of teaching appropriate for their abilities and interests would be facilitated, and children differing in background and objective would be working in close association within the same school'. But they decided they could not advocate the adoption of multilateralism as a general policy because it would be 'too subversive a change' (Spens, 1938, Ch 9 §1) They were right to think that the notion of children from different backgrounds working together was a subversive one, but it's a pity they didn't pursue the idea: it might have changed the whole nature of English education in the post-war years.

The Norwood Report (1943) on *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools* endorsed the Spens committee's view that there were 'three broad groups of pupils', i.e. the academic, the technical and the practical. 'Accordingly we would advocate that there should be three types of education, which we think of as the secondary grammar, the secondary technical, the secondary modem, that each type should have such parity as amenities and conditions can bestow' (Norwood, 1943, Ch 2 p. 14).

Regrettably, these two reports, based on the still unquestioned belief that a test at the age of eleven could accurately predict what a child might go on to achieve, underpinned the divided education system which emerged in the wake of the 1944 Education Act. Few technical schools were ever built, so the vast majority of children either 'passed' the eleven plus and gained access to the

grammar schools; or 'failed' and went to one of the new secondary moderns, which many saw as 'merely the old elementary schools writ large' (Chitty, 2007, p. 20). Thus England's post-war system of education was based on old ideas. The new primary schools were forced to stream their pupils because that made it easier to prepare the more able children to pass the eleven plus, and the new secondary schools divided children into the academic (about a fifth) and the less able (about four fifths). And even within these secondary schools, the pupils were streamed. There was now 'education for all' but it was an education based on division and segregation at every level.

Doubts and Concerns (1945-1960)

Concerns about the dangers of selection and streaming began even as the new system was being implemented. A Ministry of Education booklet, *The Nation's Schools*, published in 1945, questioned the desirability of streaming, and in his 1947 book *Activity in the primary school* MV Daniel noted that the allocation of children to classes on the basis of ability had resulted in 'the unfortunate practice' of labelling children A, B or C and of speaking of an individual as 'a 'C' child', 'sometimes even in the presence of the child himself' (Daniel, 1947, p. 87) Furthermore, streaming limited the range of ability and therefore restricted the work that could be done by the class as a whole.

Such concerns grew during the 1950s. Children who had 'failed' the eleven plus were seen to be successful in the newly-introduced GCE O Level. Some even went to university. Many teachers and educationists began to doubt Burt's 'confident assertions about innate intelligence' (Chitty, 2007, p. 3). Brian Simon argued that all children were educable and would benefit from 'the stimulus given by other children within a cohesive group'. Such a view was 'diametrically opposed to the philosophy underpinning mental testing' (Simon, 1953, p. 103, quoted in Chitty, 2007, p. 127-8).

The Labour Party was in a mess over selection. In 1954 Minister of Education Florence Horsbrugh intervened to stop London County Council (LCC) closing Eltham Hill Girls' Grammar School and transferring the pupils to the new comprehensive Kidbrooke School. But Anthony Crosland (who would later become Secretary of State for Education) warned that the class distribution of the grammar school population was 'still markedly askew' and that many children of average ability suffered from the 'appallingly low quality of some parts of the state system'. Selection was now indefensible and there was 'every reason to move to a non-segregated, comprehensive system of schools' (Crosland, 1956, p. 188-204, quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 51)

A report published by the British Psychological Society in 1957 concluded that it was now obvious that many pupils could enhance their IQ scores, and that therefore 'environmental' factors must have some effect on the development of abilities. It expressed reservations about the validity of the eleven plus examination and was also critical of the widespread practice of streaming in junior schools. The report was 'one of the important factors which

lay behind the growing support for the comprehensive ideal at the secondary level of schooling' (Chitty, 2007, p. 3)

While the Labour Party was moving (haltingly) towards a pro-comprehensive policy, it was still committed to streaming within schools. Crosland wrote of the 'alpha' and 'beta' material with which schools had to deal, and in a 1959 election pamphlet, Roy Jenkins insisted that students would still have to be divided 'according to intelligence and aptitude', though the divisions would be 'less sharp and less final' (quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 51).

The politicians were behind the times. Some primary schools – and even a few secondary moderns – had already abandoned streaming. This was made clear in the Ministry of Education handbook on *Primary Education* published in 1959, which described the practice of streaming as 'peculiar to our own day'. (DES, 1959, p. 69) The handbook argued that streaming reduced the stimulus to learning and warned of the danger that children in a streamed class appeared to be 'more on a level', tempting the teacher to underestimate 'the diversity of quality and pace of learning which in fact still remain and which must still be catered for' (DES, 1959, p. 69)

It noted that some heads had adopted a flexible organisation, creating different groupings for different kinds of work, or adopting, for example, 'a classification for the morning session that may be changed in the afternoon' (DES, 1959, p. 69-70). It praised teachers for developing the skill of educating children of very different abilities in one class 'by arranging the environment in the classroom and school so that the children learn a great deal for themselves, either individually or in small groups' (DES, 1959, p. 70).

The handbook gave legitimacy to the trend away from streaming and many schools began planning for the introduction of some kind of mixed ability organisation. In some cases, this may have been prompted by a desire to 'leap onto any bandwagon' or to 'clutch at any straw' that seemed to offer the hope of providing 'a panacea for the obvious ills that have beset many secondary schools in recent times – truancy and other behaviour problems in particular'. But there is no doubt that the movement was also prompted by an awareness on the part of many teachers and heads of the dangers of streaming, a recognition that change was necessary and 'a zeal for a system that seemed to be based on a sounder interpretation of the egalitarian philosophy of the 1944 Education Act' (Kelly, 1978, p. 3).

Comprehensivisation and Unstreaming (1960s)

Comprehensive reform gathered pace during the 1960s, though its implementation was halting and patchy. While it necessitated changes in curricula and pedagogy in all schools, its most immediate effect was undoubtedly on the primary schools. 'The abolition of selective examinations at 11 or 12 had a rapid effect on the ways in which primary schools were organised: at the start of the 1960s, most primaries were streamed; by the end of the decade, most were not' (Jones, 2003, p. 80).

In the new comprehensive schools, streaming and setting were still very much the rule. Indeed, in 1961 the LCC declared that none of its comprehensive schools based its organisation 'upon the impracticable assumption that teaching groups covering the whole range of ability are suitable or desirable' (LCC, 1961, p. 32, quoted in Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 249). There were, however, examples in some schools of mixed ability groupings in some subjects (art, music, drama, handicrafts and physical education). A similar situation prevailed in Coventry's comprehensive schools (Firth, 1963, p. 78-85, quoted in Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 249).

In his preface to the 1963 Newsom Report *Half Our Future,* Lord Boyle, then Minister of State for Education, wrote 'The essential point is that all children should have an equal opportunity of *acquiring* intelligence' (Newsom, 1963, p. iv, italics added). This was a significant statement, for if intelligence can be acquired it is clearly not innate and therefore predictive intelligence testing is invalid. A.V. Kelly commented: 'It is the possibility of such acquisition that offers scope to the teacher. Streaming was based on a denial of that possibility and the assumptions behind this have been roundly questioned' (Kelly, 1978, p. 9).

Newsom noted that the wide range of ability which all secondary modern schools contained had implications for the way the schools were organised. The commonest solution was 'a simple division by ability, even though it may be half-concealed by various tricks of nomenclature'. Streaming, 'which starts well down in the primary schools', was 'a matter of acute educational controversy'. The committee declined to take a stand on the issue, saying that much would depend on the conclusions of an NFER enquiry then being undertaken. In the meantime, schools had to deal with 'an inherited situation' (Newsom, 1963, Ch 20 para 520).

In his 1963 book *The Comprehensive School,* Dr Robin Pedley claimed that intelligence tests could not satisfactorily distinguish 'natural talent' from 'what had been learned'. This meant that children from 'literate homes', with 'interested and helpful parents', had an enormous advantage over 'children from culturally poor homes' where books were unknown and conversation was 'either limited or unprintable' (Pedley, 1963, pp. 16-17, quoted in Chitty, 2007, p. 88).

And in *The Home and the School* (1964) J.W.B. Douglas noted that well dressed children from good homes stood 'a greater chance of being put in the upper streams than their measured ability would seem to justify', and that their performance would improve as a result. This was in stark contrast to 'the deterioration noted in those children of similar initial measured ability who were placed in the lower streams'. Thus 'the validity of the initial selection appeared to be confirmed by the subsequent performance of the children' (Douglas, 1964, p. 118, quoted in Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 252).

By the mid 1960s, then, the eugenicist theories of Burt – and in particular the concept of 'innate intelligence', on which the practice of streaming depended – had been discredited. For this reason, the arguments about

streaming were at first largely negative, emphasising its educational and social disadvantages, rather than the advantages of non-streaming. But as the 1960s progressed, more positive arguments in favour of mixed ability teaching began to circulate. Heads and classroom teachers noted increased levels of motivation among the pupils, better standards of behaviour and a greater willingness to participate in the life of the school.

Unfortunately, the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), introduced in England and Wales in 1965, created even greater pressure on schools to divide students between 'academic' and 'non-academic' streams. 'Within comprehensives, GCE students were placed in different teaching groups from CSE students, while in the secondary modern school ... students who were deemed capable of CSE entry were separated from those who were not' (Jones, 2003, p. 84-85).

The tensions for pupils, teachers and schools created by attempts to reconcile 'progressive' education with selection and streaming were coming to a head. 'The post-war divided system, underpinned by spurious notions of "intelligence", was seen as having to be drastically modified or perhaps even abandoned altogether.' Parity of esteem between grammar and secondary modern schools was a sham and 'failure' in the eleven plus was 'invariably a cause of much distress both for a child and its parents' (Chitty, 2007, p. 91-2).

So the publication of the Plowden Report *Children and their Primary Schools* could not have come at a more appropriate moment. Across the country, local education authorities were now 'going comprehensive' and primary schools, freed from the constraints imposed by the need to 'get good results' in the eleven plus, were beginning to experiment with the curriculum, teaching methods and pupil grouping policies. 'The swing from streaming ... which started very slowly in the mid 1950s, meeting strong opposition, suddenly took off with extraordinary rapidity in the mid to late 1960s, gaining influential support from the Plowden Report of 1967' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 39).

On the issue of pupil grouping, the report began by describing current practice. It noted that streaming was still 'by far the most common way of organising junior schools' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 806), but there was evidence that the picture was changing. In just two years – between 1962 and 1964 – the proportion of primary teachers who favoured streaming had fallen from 85 to 30 per cent (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 807). Teachers were ahead of the public in this respect: two thirds of parents still preferred their children to be taught in streamed classes. (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 808).

It went on to list the arguments against streaming:

First, it involved selecting, and in schools which were streamed throughout this effectively meant that children were being selected at the age of seven. 'We know of no satisfactory method of assigning seven year old children, still less those who are even younger, to classes graded by attainment or ability.' It noted that between ten and twenty per cent of the predictions made at eleven were subsequently proved wrong and it warned that the earlier such predictions

were made, 'the less relevant they are bound to be to an education which will continue to 15 or later' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 811).

Because it was inevitable that many children would be wrongly placed at seven, ease of transfer between classes was important. Yet the NFER enquiry had shown that very few children changed classes (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 812). This was probably because, once in a class, children adapted themselves 'to the rate of progress or work which the teacher expects'. (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 812).

The NFER enquiry had also shown that streaming favoured girls and older children within the year group (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 814) and that it served as a means of social selection. 'More middle class children are to be found in upper streams and fewer in lower streams than would be expected from their results in objective tests' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 815).

The fact that selection was inevitably inaccurate would not matter too much 'if the conditions for upper and lower streams were equally good'. However, research showed that upper streams were mostly taught by older and more experienced teachers in classrooms with a 'generous supply of books and equipment' and even that 'a higher proportion of the lowest streams were in classrooms which faced north' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 816).

Plowden reviewed all the available evidence of the effect of streaming on children's achievement and attitudes and concluded that where unstreaming was 'established with conviction' and 'put into effect with skill', it produced 'a happy school and an atmosphere conducive to learning'. 'We welcome unstreaming in the infant or first school and hope that it will continue to spread through the age groups of the junior or middle schools' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 819).

Within the class, Plowden commended individual and group work. Groups should be based 'sometimes on interest and sometimes on achievement, but they should change in accordance with the children's needs' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 824). Group work fostered social skills and fulfilled a pedagogic function: children 'make their meaning clearer to themselves by having to explain it to others, and gain some opportunity to teach as well as to learn' (Plowden, 1967, Ch 20 para 757).

What Plowden proposed, then, was a focus on the needs of individual children through a combination of individual, group and class work. And this seems to have been exactly the system many primary schools chose in the years following Plowden's publication. Class teaching was mostly rejected; complete individualisation based on workcards and assignments was fairly widely implemented. But the most popular option 'comprised individualisation together with the use of grouping within the class'. This provided 'a rational means of controlling (or managing) the independent activities of some thirty plus children' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 55).

Plowden's views were timely. Indeed, the period from 1965 to 1970 was one of 'intense interest in the whole question of pupil grouping'. (Benn and Chitty 1996 p. 250) Unstreaming was 'very much a teachers' movement, in its

inception, at least'. (Galton Simon and Croll 1980 p. 54) There were well-attended conferences and workshops on the issue, and articles in *FORUM* and *Comprehensive Education*. By the beginning of the 1970s it was 'difficult to find a primary school that grouped its pupils into classes on the basis of ability – at least in any overt manner' (Kelly, 1978, p. 2).

The Heyday of Mixed Ability Teaching (1968-1979)

Mixed ability teaching was gaining in popularity in comprehensive schools, too. Research carried out in 1968 for *Half Way There* (Benn & Simon, 1970, p. 146-153) showed that around a quarter of comprehensive schools were teaching their first year pupils in mixed ability groups, with some continuing the practice into the second and third years. A larger survey in 1974-5, undertaken by NFER as part of its *Mixed Ability Teaching Project*, indicated that more than half the schools used mixed ability teaching groups for most subjects in the first year, a third in the second year and a quarter in the third. Setting was used, typically in maths and foreign languages, in almost half the first year classes, rising to ninety per cent of third year classes.

The Bullock Report *A Language for Life* (1975) noted that the practice of mixed ability teaching had become 'fairly widespread, especially for the twelve year olds' (Bullock, 1975, Ch 15 para 15.10) and most of the committee had reservations about streaming or setting for English. 'Classifying individuals in this way makes different pupils in the same group seem more similar than they are, and similar pupils in different groups seem more different than they are.' Ability setting also deprived the less able of 'the stimulus they so badly need' and the more able of 'opportunities to communicate with the linguistically less accomplished' (Bullock, 1975, Ch 15 para 15.10).

The committee concluded that mixed ability teaching 'is the form of grouping which offers most hope for English teaching', though they acknowledged its complexities: 'it requires a great deal of thought and planning' (Bullock, 1975, Ch 15 para 15.12).

By 1978, the HMI Survey of *Primary Education in England* could report that 'in very few schools were classes streamed according to ability'. (DES 1978 Ch 3 para 3.3) Within the mixed ability classes, some vertically grouped, teachers employed a range of methods. Most teachers grouped children in various ways for some of their work. These groups 'varied according to the subject being taught or the kind of activity being undertaken and were usually formed or reformed for particular purposes or according to the needs of the moment' (DES, 1978, Ch 3 para 3.5).

Almost three quarters of the classes were grouped by ability for their work in mathematics, between a half and two thirds were grouped by ability for reading and, in fewer classes, for writing. Individual work assignments were used in 'a considerable majority of classes for the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics' (DES, 1978, Ch 3 para 3.7).

The survey was unable to compare the attainments of 11 year olds in streamed and mixed ability classes because the number of the former was too small. It did note, however, that 'when the NFER scores in reading and mathematics for the streamed classes were omitted from the calculations there was virtually no change in the average scores' (DES, 1978, Ch 7 para 7.22).

Meanwhile, another investigation into the use of mixed ability groupings in comprehensive schools in England carried out by HMI between 1975 and 1978 found that just over a third of schools used mixed ability groupings for most subjects in the first year, almost a quarter in the second year, and more than one in ten in the first three years. Only two per cent of schools taught mixed ability groups in all five years. (Benn and Chitty 1996 p. 253) Maurice Holt commented that 'to many educationists the streamed comprehensive school is a contradiction in terms'. He advocated the use of a range of teaching strategies and lamented the fact that 'most teachers have been trained, and are still being trained, to use teaching styles which work best with streamed groups' (Holt, 1978, p. 164).

With mixed ability teaching now widespread, A.V. Kelly sought to offer a rationale for its use. In his 1978 book *Mixed Ability Grouping*, he approached the task from two directions – 'from a consideration of the criticisms that have been levelled at the system of streaming ... and from more positive arguments for replacing that system with mixed ability classes' (Kelly, 1978, p. 6).

On the negative side, he argued that the assumptions underlying streaming had been discredited, that streaming had contributed to a huge wastage of talent, that it had had damaging effects on the progress and social development of pupils and on the morale of teachers, and that children's ability to think divergently was more likely to be encouraged in 'the less formal atmosphere of non-streamed schools than in the more formal atmosphere of those that stream' (Kelly, 1978, p. 8-17).

Kelly's positive rationale for mixed ability grouping had three strands. First, it was based on a view of people as co-operative social beings and of society as egalitarian. Second, it was the result of major changes in 'the view we take of what education itself is'. And third, it was 'a consequence of some major questions that are being asked about the nature of values themselves and the basis for making judgements of value about anything, especially about different kinds of knowledge, and a resultant desire to avoid dogmatism in the planning of a curriculum and to endeavour to make it meaningful to the individual child in the light of his own needs and interests' (Kelly, 1978, p. 22-23).

In Kelly's view, the strongest case for mixed ability grouping was that, unlike streaming, it could be 'flexible enough to allow for the creation of different groupings for different purposes and to facilitate continuing development of all kinds' (Kelly, 1978, p. 24-25).

While the period from 1968 to 1979 may be regarded as the heyday of mixed ability teaching – and of 'progressive education' in general – it also saw a series of increasingly vitriolic attacks by traditionalists. An economic recession resulted in cutbacks in education spending and a 'general disenchantment with

education as a palliative of society's ills' took hold (Galton et al, 1980, p. 41); a series of 'Black Papers' argued for a return to traditional teaching methods (one even contained eugenicist articles by Cyril Burt, Hans Eysenck and Richard Lynn); the 'William Tyndale affair' gave the traditionalists ammunition; Prime Minister Jim Callaghan gave his Ruskin College speech, initiating a 'Great Debate' about the nature and purposes of education; the Assessment of Performance Unit was established; and local authorities began the mass testing of pupils.

Conservative Attempts to Introduce 'Differentiation' (1979-1997)

It was against this background that Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power in 1979 determined to reintroduce eleven plus selection. However, attempts to bring back grammar schools in Solihull and elsewhere failed and, to the government's dismay, it was often the very middle-class parents on whose support they had counted who protested most and who seemed happy with and committed to their local comprehensive schools.

Keith Joseph, Education Secretary from 1981 to 1986, decided that if he couldn't have selection, he would find other ways of introducing 'differentiation' into comprehensive schools. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), funded by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), was one strategy. There was some confusion about the project, with Joseph arguing that it was targeted at students of lower ability while MSC Chair David Young suggested it was aimed at those who were 'bright and able' but hadn't been 'attracted by academic subjects' (Chitty, 2007, pp. 111-112). Young said he expected that by the end of the decade 15 per cent of students would go into higher education, 30 to 35 per cent would stay on to do TVEI and other vocational and academic courses, while the rest would simply go on to a two year Youth Training Scheme. Thus the wartime vision of 'three types of mind' had 'survived virtually intact into the closing decades of the century' (Chitty, 2007, p. 112).

Outside the Thatcherite circle, however, mixed ability teaching was still the favoured approach. The Cockcroft Report *Mathematics Counts* (1982) saw advantages in mixed ability teaching in primary schools, although it warned that there could be 'problems of ensuring continuity' and that 'the quality of the mathematics teaching inevitably depends largely on the strength and interest of the class teacher' (Cockcroft, 1982, Ch 6 para 348). It did not consider that vertical grouping offered 'any advantages for the teaching of mathematics' (Cockcroft, 1982, Ch 6 para 349).

Group work and setting were employed in most schools. It was important for teachers to realise that 'considerable differences will exist within each group' (Cockcroft, 1982, Ch 6 para 350).

With regard to secondary schools, the National Secondary Survey Report of 1980 had shown that half the schools taught mathematics in mixed ability

groups during at least part of the first year, about a quarter during the second year and an eighth during the third year. (Cockcroft 1982 Ch 9 para 495) Mixed ability maths teaching was a 'satisfactory' form of organisation which the committee saw 'no reason to change', provided there were suitable teachers (Cockcroft, 1982, Ch 9 para 496).

Individual learning schemes were now more widely used and had had 'considerable success' in the hands of 'skilled teachers who are committed to their use'. But there were some dangers (such as the difficulty of providing opportunities for oral work and discussion) and 'it should not be supposed that the use of individual learning schemes in mathematics is suited to all teachers or to all pupils' (Cockcroft, 1982, Ch 9 para 501).

In their 1983 book *Mixed Ability Grouping: a philosophical perspective* Bailey & Bridges argued that the increasing scarcity of money and staff in the early 1980s had thrown a sharper focus on pupil grouping issues. 'The enthusiasm for unstreaming has faltered, the pedagogic consequences and practical difficulties associated with the innovation have been seen in clearer perspective and even the principles underlying mixed ability organisation have come under renewed critical scrutiny' (Bailey & Bridges, 1983, p. xi).

It was one thing to organise a school on the basis of mixed ability classes, it was quite another to decide how to teach those classes. 'In our experience the teachers most deeply disillusioned with mixed ability grouping are those in schools which have taken the first of these steps without giving proper consideration to the second' (Bailey & Bridges, 1983, p. 5).

Bailey & Bridges provided a rationale for mixed ability grouping based on four sets of arguments. First, it enabled secondary schools to make informed decisions about their pupils' abilities rather than labelling them at the outset of their secondary career. Second, it avoided some of the worst consequences of streaming, notably the humiliation, frustration and sense of failure felt by lower stream pupils and the reinforcement of a vicious circle of social-economic/educational disadvantage. Third, it respected each child as an individual of equal worth. And fourth, it expressed and encouraged the values of fraternity, community and co-operation (Bailey & Bridges, 1983, p. 9-23).

They went on to note that there was 'a *prima facie* conflict ... between the concern for individuality and the concern for equality' (Bailey & Bridges, 1983, p. 24). HMI had noted that 'the notion of equality tends to be associated with a common curriculum and common provision to which all must have equal access, that of individuality is associated with variety and divergence' (DES, 1978, p. 18-19, quoted in Bailey & Bridges, 1983, p. 24).

There was also the problem of assessment. The argument that assessment was bound to be unfair, that the subsequent 'labelling' of children was dehumanising and prejudicial to the less able was difficult to reconcile with the desire to match curriculum, teaching style and resources to individual needs. 'How such matching is to be done without some form of assessment is difficult to understand' (Bailey & Bridges, 1983, p. 25).

The Swann Report *Education for All* (1985) made no specific recommendations about pupil grouping policies, but it noted that for many years IQ scores had been used as a measure of academic potential and had played a part in determining the set, stream or band in which pupils were placed. This was liable 'to condition the expectations of individual teachers, and indeed of the educational system as a whole' (Swann, 1985, Ch 3 para 4.10). The committee was concerned that streaming was sometimes covert racism, since a disproportionate number of black pupils were put into lower streams (Swann, 1985, Ch 3 Annex A, p. 94),

The 1985 HMI Survey of *Education 8-12 in Combined and Middle Schools* found that almost all the schools formed classes on the basis of mixed ability grouping, though setting was used for older pupils, mainly for the teaching of mathematics and, to a lesser extent, English. 'No association was identified between setting in English and mathematics and the quality of pupil's work in these subjects' (DES, 1985, Ch 7 para 7.3).

A year later, in his book *Two Cultures of Schooling: the case of middle schools*, Andy Hargreaves examined the practice of 9-13 middle schools in relation to pupil grouping. Streaming and banding were 'not especially widespread in the 9-13 middle school' (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 103) but setting was 'exceedingly common'. In fact, 'almost as many middle schools set their pupils for mathematics, English and science at 12+ as do secondary schools one year later at 13+' (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 105). The figures supported the argument that secondary-style conventions and pressures influenced middle school practice greatly in the higher years and so helped perpetuate 'the long-standing division between primary and secondary education at age 11' (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 106). It was more difficult to compare setting in the first two years of the middle schools with the same years in primary schools since the HMI survey of primary schools in 1978 had made no mention of it. However, it did appear that 9-13 middle schools made more use of setting than primary schools and in this respect, they were 'remarkably out of tune with current primary practice' (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 108).

The Elton Report on *Discipline in Schools* (1989) warned that 'a school in which academic achievement is the only source of positive encouragement is likely to experience more difficulties with low achieving pupils' (Elton, 1989, Ch 4 para 82). These difficulties were exacerbated if academic emphasis was translated into the rigid streaming of pupils by ability, which still existed in about five per cent of secondary schools. Setting, coupled with the recognition of a wide range of non-academic achievements, could 'help to restore to low academic achievers a proper sense of self-respect, and avoid generating the feelings of rejection and hostility that often give rise to bad behaviour' (Elton, 1989, Ch 4 para 83).

The national survey conducted on behalf of the Elton committee found that more than half the classes which teachers described as 'difficult' were grouped by ability in some way and that three quarters of these groups were of

'below average attainment level compared with other pupils in the school' (Elton, 1989, App D, p. 235).

John Major replaced Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in November 1990 and appointed Kenneth Clarke as Secretary of State for Education. Clarke wanted to see a return to streaming and more formal teaching methods in primary schools, so in 1992 he commissioned Robin Alexander, Jim Rose and Chris Woodhead to produce a report on *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools*. Produced in just one month, the paper quickly became known as the 'Three Wise Men Report'.

In fact, if Clarke was hoping for a report which would endorse streaming and whole class teaching, he was to be disappointed.

The paper argued that the fundamental problem with streaming was that it was a crude device 'which cannot do justice to the different abilities a pupil may show in different subjects and contexts'. The authors therefore recommended flexible grouping so that pupils could be placed 'in a particular ability group for a particular purpose'. They warned that the mounting evidence about teacher under-expectation and pupil underachievement meant that teachers must not assume that pupils' ability was fixed. 'Assumptions about pupils' ability should be no more than working hypotheses to be modified as and when new evidence emerges' (DES, 1992, para 85).

The report considered three 'organisational strategies': 'Each pupil can be taught as an individual. The class can be taught as a whole. The class can be organised into groups. These strategies are, in practice, not mutually exclusive. Many teachers use all three' (DES, 1992, para 87).

Individual teaching was 'an understandable aspiration' and there were times when it was, indeed, necessary. But trying to teach every pupil in a class as an individual was 'fraught with difficulties' because each pupil would receive 'a minute proportion of the teacher's attention' and because interaction between teacher and pupil was therefore likely to be 'as superficial as it is brief and infrequent' (DES, 1992, para 88).

Whole class teaching appeared to provide 'the order, control, purpose and concentration which many critics believe are lacking in modern primary classrooms' (DES, 1992, para 89). It was 'associated with higher-order questioning, explanations and statements, and these in turn correlate with higher levels of pupil performance'. Furthermore, teachers with a substantial commitment to whole class teaching appeared to be 'particularly effective in teaching the basic subjects' (DES, 1992, para 90). Whole class teaching had potential weaknesses, however, notably that it tended to be 'pitched too much towards the middle of the ability range', and that pupils often reduced their rate of working to meet the teacher's norm (DES, 1992, para 91). Nonetheless whole class teaching was 'an essential teaching skill, which all primary school teachers should be able to deploy as appropriate' (DES, 1992, para 92).

The practice of organising a class into groups based on ability was sometimes appropriate, but teachers needed to be sensitive to the fact that 'the self esteem of lower ability pupils could be affected adversely' (DES, 1992, para

94). Group work had several advantages: it enabled resources to be shared; fostered the social development 'which primary schools rightly believe to be an essential part of their task'; and, above all, enabled pupils to 'interact with each other and their teacher' (DES, 1992, para 95). However, the authors warned that pupils who were seated in groups were not necessarily working as a group (DES, 1992, para 96), that group work could be counterproductive if teachers tried to manage too many groups or have pupils working on too many different activities or subjects simultaneously (DES, 1992, para 97), and that it was important for teachers to monitor the time they gave to each group and to strike a balance between different areas of the curriculum (DES, 1992, para 98).

The paper concluded that teachers needed the skills and judgement to use whichever organisational strategy – class, group and individual – was appropriate to the task in hand. 'The judgement, it must be stressed, should be educational and organisational, rather than, as it so often is, doctrinal' (DES, 1992, para 99). The critical notion was that of fitness for purpose (DES, 1992, para 101).

The Three Wise Men Report was widely perceived as an attack on the 'Plowden culture' in primary schools. In fact, the message of both reports was remarkably similar. Too similar, apparently, for the new Education Secretary John Patten, who, in August 1992, appointed John Marks to the newly-formed National Curriculum Council. Marks, an Open University tutor and member of a right-wing think-tank, supported a return to selective schools, streaming by ability and traditional teaching methods.

During the 1990s HMI and Ofsted reports increasingly urged teachers to ensure 'differentiation by ability', especially when teaching mixed ability classes. Coupled with the pressure on schools to perform well in the government's new school league tables, this had the unfortunate effect not of enhancing learning opportunities for all but of focusing resources on the borderline pupils who might just get to Level 4 of the Key Stage 2 SATs in primary schools, or obtain the necessary GCSE grades in secondary schools.

Despite the efforts of the traditionalists, mixed ability teaching was still the norm in primary schools and was also remarkably widespread at secondary level. A large-scale survey of comprehensive schools in 1993-4 showed that just over half used mixed ability arrangements for all subjects and pupils in Year 7; only 16 per cent of schools used 'various forms of setting, streaming or banding with little or no scope for mixed ability arrangements'. In Year 8, almost a fifth of schools used mixed ability for all subjects with a further third using mixed ability for most subjects and setting for one or two subjects. In Year 9, few schools taught all subjects in mixed ability classes but almost a fifth used mixed ability groupings with no more than two subjects setted (Benn & Chitty, 1996, pp. 254-256).

Benn & Chitty concluded that non-streaming continued to occupy 'an important place in the culture of many comprehensive schools' and that the issue of mixed ability teaching no longer aroused 'much enthusiasm or

excitement': it was largely taken for granted (Benn & Chitty, 1996, pp. 257-258).

A comparison of the exam results of pupils who had been taught in mixed-ability groups with those taught in ability-based groups showed that the type of grouping policy used made no difference. This was a positive finding because it meant that pupil grouping could be considered 'in terms of the social cohesion of schools': research showed that 'mixed ability was associated with schools that were often more socially successful' (Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 466).

New Labour's Assault on the Comprehensive Ideal (1997-2008)

Tony Blair's 'New Labour' party swept to power in the 1997 general election. The new government's first White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, published in July 1997, was to prove the opening salvo in a sustained campaign against the very concept of comprehensive education, which, it said, needed to be 'reformed' and 'modernised'. As a start, secondary schools would be encouraged to become 'specialist schools' which would be allowed to select a small proportion of their pupils on the basis of 'perceived aptitudes'.

It also launched a vicious attack on mixed ability teaching, asserting, 'though without supporting evidence' (Chitty, 2007, p. 118), that it had been successful 'only in the hands of the best teachers' and should be used in future only where 'there was proof that it could be truly effective'. The government would not 'defend the failings of across-the-board mixed ability teaching' which, in too many cases had 'failed both to stretch the brightest and to respond to the needs of those who have fallen behind' (DfEE, 1997, p. 38, quoted in Chitty, 2007, p. 119).

It urged secondary schools to use setting, particularly for science, maths and languages. 'Unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools.' (DfEE, 1997, p. 38, quoted in Chitty, 2007, p. 120). Primary schools should also consider setting, and all schools should inform parents about their pupil grouping policies. A government strategy for 'the early identification and support of particularly able and talented children' would include 'accelerated learning for some pupils, specialist schools and partnership with independent schools' (DfEE, 1997, p. 39, quoted in Chitty, 2007, p. 120).

Two years later a London Institute of Education study revealed that children aged 11-14 'made just as much progress in English and science if the most and least able were taught together. ... The cleverest were not held back, and the least able did as well or better in tests at the age of 14.' (John Carvel, *The Guardian,* 1 December 1999) Thus setting brought no academic advantage, while mixed ability teaching encouraged pupils to feel good about themselves. One of the authors, Dr Judith Ireson, commented that, in the light of the

evidence, 'it would be unwise for comprehensives to move towards more extreme forms of setting and particularly unwise to adopt streaming'.

The government responded that its preference for setting was based on evidence from Ofsted inspectors. Ofsted replied that it had collected no such evidence, though its inspectors did believe that setting could help raise standards in primary schools.

In 2001, New Labour launched an even more vitriolic attack on comprehensive education. The Green Paper *Schools Building on Success* claimed that comprehensive reform had had 'social' rather than 'economic' goals and had emphasised egalitarianism at the expense of standards. It had been an overreaction to the failings of eleven plus selection, and had been dominated by the 'ideology of unstreamed teaching' (Blair, 1996, p. 175, quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 156). As a result, it had failed to differentiate among students and had not linked 'different provision to individual attitudes and abilities' (DfEE, 2001, p. 5). It had, extraordinarily, even been responsible for mass illiteracy and slow rates of economic growth.

2004 saw the publication of Cambridge School of Education's *Learning without Limits*. Writing in the *TES* (9 July, 2004), Mary Jane Drummond explained that the five-year project had brought together nine experienced classroom teachers who were motivated by learning that was 'free from the unnecessary limits imposed by ability-focused practices, free from the indignity of being labelled top, middle or bottom, free from the wounding consciousness of being treated as someone who can only aspire to limited achievements'. She hoped the book would 'convince the government of the need to replace their current policies with an improvement agenda committed to freeing education from the damaging effects of the fixed-ability mindset' (Drummond, 2004)

The government, of course, wasn't about to do any such thing. Indeed, the 2005 White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* contained the extraordinary assertion that children could be divided into three main categories: 'the gifted and talented, the struggling and the just average' (DfES, 2005, p. 20). This was the twenty-first century reincarnation of Hadow's view of children as As, Bs and Cs (1931), and Norwood's 'three broad groups of pupils' (1943). More than half a century of research had clearly made no impression on government ministers.

Unsurprisingly, the needs of 'able and talented' children continued to be prioritised: a National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) had been established in 2002, and the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (July 2004) had contained a section on 'gifted and talented students'. Now, the 2005 White Paper included a proposal to set up a national register of gifted and talented pupils – an idea 'of which Francis Galton would have heartily approved' (Chitty, 2007, pp. 120-121).

Equally unsurprisingly, the White Paper repeatedly endorsed setting. There would be 'more grouping and setting by subject ability' (DfES, 2005, p. 10) but, conversely, a much greater emphasis on 'personalised learning for every child' (DfES, 2005, p. 40). The best schools offered 'exciting whole-class

teaching, which gets the best from every child' and 'setting or grouping children of similar ability and attainment' (DfES, 2005, p. 51). Grouping by ability, it claimed, 'can help to build motivation, social skills and independence; and most importantly can raise standards because pupils are better engaged in their own learning' (DfES, 2005, p. 58). This was, of course, exactly the opposite of what the previous fifty years' research had shown, but then politicians have never allowed the evidence to cloud their judgement.

As Chitty noted, there was no evidence here that the New Labour government could be persuaded to relinquish its 'obsession with ability labelling and ability-focused teaching'. In addition to its division of children into 'the gifted and talented, the struggling and the just average', its concern for the 'gifted and talented' was 'little more than a subtle way of legitimising the process of academic selection' (Chitty, 2007, p. 129).

Anyone who was tempted to turn to the Conservative Party for a more humane and evidence-based view of education was to be sadly disappointed. In December 2005 the newly-elected Tory leader David Cameron promised 'more setting and streaming ... with a grammar stream in every subject'.

In May 2008 the independent Primary Review, established in 2006 to investigate 'the condition and future of primary education in England', published Research Survey 9/2 *Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for teaching and learning*. This collated the findings of dozens of research projects 'to explore different school and class grouping arrangements, the factors influencing them, and their impact on pupil learning and adjustment in the primary phase'. It distinguished between grouping at the class and within-class levels, and argued that 'the latter is likely to be more important for pupils' educational attainments, behaviour and attitudes to schooling' (Blatchford et al, 2008 p. 1).

The authors first considered between-class grouping policies: streaming, setting and mixed-ability teaching. They noted that the 'heated debates' on this issue over many years had sometimes been 'unhelpfully polemical' and argued that 'the reality is more complex and less clear' (Blatchford et al, 2008, p. 1). They concluded that grouping classes by ability had 'no positive effects on attainment but has detrimental affects on the social and personal outcomes for some children'. The allocation of pupils to such groups was 'a somewhat arbitrary affair' often dependent on 'factors not related to attainment'. And, while movement between groups was theoretically possible, in practice it was 'frequently restricted', limiting the opportunities for some children (Blatchford et al, 2008, p. 28).

Within classes, the authors recommended grouping pupils in different ways for different activities. This 'offers more flexibility, facilitates movement between groups structured by ability, and avoids limiting the opportunities for some children'. Teachers needed to tailor work more specifically to pupil needs and to be aware that pupils' attainment levels 'do not follow a stable trajectory': groupings should be 'constantly reviewed to take account of this' and should vary according to the nature of the task. This would avoid children 'labelling

themselves as being in one specific group'. There should be more research on how such flexibility could best be developed and how it impacted on pupils and teachers (Blatchford et al, 2008, p. 28).

In their conclusion, the authors argued that 'over the long history of research into school structure and classroom grouping, there has been little transfer between research findings and widespread classroom application'. Concerns about underachievement, poor attitudes and exclusion had often been met with calls for more differentiation by ability or attainment. The review made clear that 'such moves are not supported in the research literature'. In fact, differentiation by ability or attainment had resulted in 'limited access to knowledge by some pupils, domination of pedagogic practices by teachers, preferred teachers for 'elite' pupils and enforcement of social divisions among pupils' (Blatchford et al, 2008, p. 30). The development of 'classroom-based social pedagogy' (including the effective use of pupil groupings) must now become a priority. When teachers were committed to developing 'relational and other social pedagogic practices' within their classrooms, 'pupils respond with improved attainment, classroom behaviours and pro-learning attitudes' (Blatchford et al, 2008, p. 31).

November 2008 saw the publication of two reports on social mobility. *Getting On, Getting Ahead*, published by the Cabinet Office's Strategy Unit, acknowledged that bright children from poorer homes were still likely to be overtaken by less able children from middle-class families and that attainment gaps which opened up early in a child's life were much harder to close later on.

And a week later, Manchester University's School of Education published *Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils*. Denis Mongon and Chris Chapman focused their research on 'pupils from a white British ethnic background who qualified for free school meals'. They found that family income and status were 'by far the most significant correlates of success in the school system' (John Crace, *The Guardian,* 11 November 2008).

In other words, the relationship between underachievement and social class was virtually unchanged since the late 1800s. Mongon said it was important for teachers to acknowledge that the correlation between underachievement and class did not mean there was a causal relationship between the two. 'We have to get rid of the idea there is a defining underachieving stereotype', he said.

Which is, I think, where we came in.

Summary

English society has always been divided on class lines. For centuries, such schools as existed catered almost exclusively for the middle and upper classes, and education for the masses was regarded as a dangerous idea. In the nineteenth century the needs of industry, commerce and international trade, and the extension of the right to vote, all forced the government to create a state education system. At first it tried to do so on the basis of the existing class

divisions, as demonstrated by the Clarendon, Taunton and Newcastle Reports in the 1860s.

It quickly became clear that this position was untenable, so an alternative excuse for segregating children had to be found. Psychology and eugenics, with their notion of 'innate intelligence', provided the answer. This theory, promoted most notably by Cyril Burt, became widely accepted. It informed all major education reports from Hadow (1924) to Norwood (1943) and it underpinned the establishment of the 'tripartite' system of schools following the 1944 Education Act. It resulted in division at every level of the education system: selection at eleven for different types of secondary school, streaming of children into A, B and C classes in the primary school, and the grouping of pupils within classes on the basis of ability.

However, concerns about the system began to surface as early as 1945. The theories about intelligence on which it was based were questioned and eventually discredited, many children were humiliated by their perceived 'failure', selection procedures were flawed, streamed systems were inflexible, there was massive wastage of talent, early decisions about children's intelligence became self-fulfilling prophecies, and the whole system perpetuated and accentuated social class divisions. (But then that's what it had been intended to do).

By the 1960s comprehensivisation was under way and the abolition of the eleven plus prompted many primary schools to 'unstream'. They discovered that mixed ability teaching did not negatively affect the performance of the 'more able' but led to improvements in attitudes and behaviour and in the self-esteem of the 'less able'. The 1967 Plowden Report strongly backed mixed ability teaching involving a judicious mix of whole class, group and individual work. Unstreaming began to be seen in the lower years of the comprehensive school.

In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher's Tory governments were forced to accept that eleven plus selection was all but dead, so they dreamed up 'differentiation' as a way of segregating children into different courses.

In the decade from 1997 Tony Blair's governments launched stinging attacks on the comprehensive ideal and mixed ability teaching, and pressured schools into adopting specialisation and setting. (To make the system even more fragmented and divisive, Blair added further toxic ingredients to the mixture – city academies, 'trust' schools and a large increase in the number of 'faith' schools).

In the forty years since Plowden there have been dozens of research projects which have investigated teaching strategies and pupil grouping policies. Almost without exception, they have shown that mixed ability teaching, with appropriate and flexible use of in-class groups, is the most beneficial system of organising a school. Yet politicians of both major parties still cling to specialisation and setting. They are, apparently, never happier than when promoting notions of Us and Them.

Note

Derek Gillard's website (http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com) includes a longer version of this article and the full texts of most of the reports to which reference is made.

References

Bailey, C. & Bridges, D. (1983) *Mixed Ability Grouping: a philospohical perspective* London: Allen & Unwin.

Benn, C. & Chitty, C. (1996) *Thirty Years on: is comprehensive education alive and well or struggling to survive?* London: David Fulton.

Benn, C. & Simon, B. (1970) *Half Way There: report on the British comprehensive school reform*, 2nd Edn. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

Blair T (1996) *New Britain: my vision of a young country.* London: Fourth Estate.

Blatchford, P., Hallam, S., Ireson, J. & Kutnick, P., with Creech, A. (2008) *Classes, Groups and Transitions: structures for teaching and learning* (Primary Review Research Survey 9/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Bullock (1975) *A Language for Life.* Report of the Committee of Enquiry. London: HMSO

Carvel, J. (1999) Setting 'gives no better results', *The Guardian.* 1 December.

Chitty, C. (2007) *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education.* London: Continuum.

Cockcroft (1982) *Mathematics Counts.* Report of the Committee of Inquiry. London: HMSO.

Crace, J. (2008) Long Division, *The Guardian,* 11 November.

Crosland, A. (1956) *The Future of Socialism.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Daniel, M.V. (1947) *Activity in the Primary School.l* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

DES (1959) *Primary Education: suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others concerned with the work of primary schools.* London: HMSO.

DES (1978) *Primary Education in England: a survey by HM Inspectors of Schools.* London: HMSO.

DES (1985) *Education 8-12 in Combined and Middle Schools: an HMI survey.* London: HMSO.

DES (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools: a discussion paper* (The 'Three Wise Men Report'). London: HMSO.

DfEE (1997) White Paper *Excellence in Schools.* Cmnd 3681. London: HMSO.

DfEE (2001) Green Paper *Schools Building on Success.* London: HMSO.

DfES (2005) White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All.* London: HMSO.

Douglas JWB (1964) *The Home and the School: a study of of ability and attainment in the primary school.* London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Drummond MJ (2004) Going Beyond the Limits of Learning, *The Times Educational Supplement,* 9 July.

Elton (1989) *Discipline in Schools.* Report of the Committee of Enquiry. London: HMSO.

Firth, G.C. (1963) *Comprehensive Schools in Coventry and Elsewhere.* Coventry: Coventry Education Committee.

Galton, M., Simon, B. & Croll, P. (1980) *Inside the Primary Classroom* (The ORACLE Report). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hadow (1924) *Psychological Tests of Educable Capacity.* Report of the Consultative Committee. London: HMSO.

Hadow (1926) *The Education of the Adolescent.* Report of the Consultative Committee London: HMSO.

Hadow (1931) *The Primary School.* Report of the Consultative Committee. London: HMSO.

Hadow (1933) *Infant and Nursery Schools.* Report of the Consultative Committee. London: HMSO.

Hargreaves, A. (1986) *Two Cultures of Schooling: the case of middle schools.* London: Falmer.

Holt, M. (1978) *The Common Curriculum: its structure and style in the comprehensive school.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Jones, K. (2003) *Education in Britain: 1944 to the present.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kelly, A.V. (1978) *Mixed-ability Grouping.* London: Harper & Row.

LCC (London County Council) (1961) *London Comprehensive Schools: a survey of sixteen schools.* London: LCC.

Newsom (1963) *Half Our Future.* Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England). London: HMSO.

Norwood (1943) *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools.* Report of the Committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council. London: HMSO.

Pedley, R. (1963) *The Comprehensive School.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Plowden (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools.* Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England). London: HMSO.

Spens (1938) *Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools.* Report of the Consultative Committee. London: HMSO.

Swann (1985) *Education for All.* Report of the Committee of Enquiry, Cmnd 9453. London: HMSO.

DEREK GILLARD taught in primary and middle schools in England for more than thirty years, including eleven as a head teacher. He retired in 1997 but continues to write on educational issues for his website and for *FORUM*. *Correspondence*: Derek Gillard, 60 Oxford Road, Marston, Oxford OX3 0RD, United Kingdom (dg@dial.pipex.com).