

BOOK REVIEW

Ending Rejection at 11+: see how it can be done

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This important pamphlet, *Ending Rejection at 11+: see how it can be done*, which is produced by *Comprehensive Future*, the organization that campaigns for fair school admission policies in England was launched at a conference at the House of Commons on the evening of 20 October 2009. Few MPs were present on that occasion; but it deserves to be read by all politicians and policy-makers capable of appreciating good arguments and sound reasoning – if any such beings still exist at a time when the educational thinking of all the main parties is dominated by a refusal to challenge the status quo with all its elitist assumptions.

The introduction by Fiona Millar makes the case against labelling children as ‘failures’ at eleven, pointing out that when children are ‘rejected’ at such a young age, it can have ‘profound long-term effects on their self-confidence and aspirations’. Neither teachers nor tests can predict with any degree of certainty how a child will develop between the ages of eleven and sixteen, what they will enjoy learning, or what they will excel at. Sadly, this short well-intentioned Introduction also contains the quite meaningless statement that ‘every child should have the chance to develop their potential to the full, without prejudgement of what that might be.’ This sort of thing appears in the prospectus of every primary and secondary school where the headteacher has no understanding of the implications of the concept of ‘educability’ and has never read Brian Simon’s demolition of the idea of ‘full potential’ as a fixed entity or achievable goal. (Coincidentally, while writing this Review, I read in today’s *Education Guardian* [2 February 2010] that, according to Toby Young, who has suddenly become an education ‘expert’, ‘one reason that social mobility has collapsed in this country is that state schools aren’t very good about making sure their most gifted students *realise their full potential*’).

New Labour has done nothing about eleven-plus selection since coming to power in 1997; and the future looks bleak. According to recent education and training statistics, there are 3,343 secondary schools in this country, of which 164 are grammar schools; 113 are secondary moderns; 248 are middle deemed 'secondary'; 2 are technical; 23 are 'other' (whatever that means); and 2,793 are 'comprehensive'. It is not clear how these 'official' statistics were arrived at, but the figure of 113 secondary modern schools must be wrong; and one would like to know how the statisticians arrived at their definition of 'comprehensive'.

The number of grammar schools (164) has stayed the same for a very long period; but this disguises that fact that the number of pupils in grammar schools is actually increasing. In reply to a Parliamentary Question on 28 April 2008, Schools Minister Jim Knight revealed that the number of grammar-school pupils had increased by almost 30,000 over the past ten years – 127,710 in 1996 rising to 156,800 in 2007 – with the overall percentage of pupils in selective schools increasing from 4.2 per cent to 4.7 per cent. The response to a more recent Parliamentary Question, on 24 June 2009, revealed that there was still an upward trend – to 4.9 per cent – while the secondary school population as a whole was actually falling. Grammar schools are being allowed to expand, and, year by year, they are able to admit a greater percentage of Year 7 pupils.

When New Labour came to power, it made it clear that decision-making on the future of eleven-plus selection would be delegated to parents and governors in local communities, and Ripon in north Yorkshire is the only place to date where a ballot on selection has been held. The long-term future of Ripon Grammar School, founded in 1556 and one of the oldest in England, was, in fact, guaranteed as parents voted by a majority of around two to one to reject the proposition that, henceforth, the School should be required to admit 'children of all abilities'. On a 75 per cent turnout, 1,493 of the 3,000 parents who were entitled to vote, rejected the proposition, with only 748 voting in favour.

Back in the early 1970s, when the abolition of selection was being discussed in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), one member of the Education Committee astonished his colleagues by announcing: 'The way to end selection is easy: stop selecting'. This pamphlet sets out to show that this idea is not simply 'too good to be true'; it can be done – provided the relevant people want it to succeed. The pamphlet tackles the problem of selection in three case-studies focussing on respectively: a wholly selective LA (Kent); a partially selective area (Birmingham); and two selective outposts in an otherwise non-selective area (Skipton and Ripon).

In the case of Kent, it is argued that most grammar schools could start to become 'all-ability' 11-19 schools, with little or no disruption to either pupils or staff. In September of the start year, each school could admit its first 'all-ability' intake, and then would gradually assume a true comprehensive character over the ensuing seven years. Where existing schools are too small to be viable, there could either be amalgamations or the adoption of a 11-14 or 11-16 pattern. In the case of Birmingham, where most of the 82 maintained secondary

schools are already comprehensive, it would be simple enough for the selective schools to become either 11-19 comprehensive schools in their own right or sixth-form colleges helping to enrich the post-16 educational provision for all the youngsters in this large conurbation. The three schools in Skipton could combine to create a mixed comprehensive; and the grammar and secondary modern schools in Ripon which have already been working more closely together since the 2000 ballot could simple amalgamate.

It all sounds very simple and straightforward, but it would require the support of the Secretary of State. And therein lies the problem.....

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