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## Representative Refusals: what comprehensives keep out, and what ministers keep to themselves

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**ABSTRACT** This article restates the needs for a comprehensive system of education to be intolerant of 'ability'-thinking, and wonders why so few government ministers are prepared to reveal the type of school to which they send their children.

'This is the School,' the old man said mildly. 'I am the Doorkeeper.  
Enter if you can.' (Ursula Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*)

### **An Open Door**

Near the outset of Ursula LeGuin's marvellous series of Earthsea novels the youngster Ged arrives on Roke Island (the Isle of the Wise) to attend the School there. But he finds he may not pass at once through the narrow entrance of ivory and horn which is overseen by the Doorkeeper. He tries three times to enter, and each time, though he thinks he has stepped inside, he finds himself still in the square without. And so he learns his first lesson at the School:

At last he looked at the old man who waited inside. 'I cannot enter,'  
he said unwillingly, 'unless you help me.'  
The doorkeeper answered, 'Say your name.'  
Then again Ged stood still a while; for a man never speaks his own  
name aloud, until more than his life's safety is at stake.

A specialist school if ever there was one, the School for Wizards, as its name implies, has a selection policy. But at least it is a self-selection policy. Poised and silent at this liminal moment, Ged could decide to return home and continue his life as a goatherd: schooling is not compulsory on Earthsea. The choice to enter the school, and the power to do so, lie with Ged, albeit he needs some help to realise it. On fictional Roke education begins with a door that is

and isn't open, and with no preconceived view of the student who presents there. The Doorkeeper doesn't know anything of Ged until Ged chooses to take the risk of trusting him (and hence the School) and declares who he is:

'I am Ged,' he said aloud. Stepping forward then  
he entered the open doorway.

On our own island of the wise, things are more complicated. Declaration or disclosure of who the student is will precede her arrival at the door even of a non-selective secondary school, and (just as importantly) an authorised way of knowing the student will already inhabit the institution. Foreknowledge of the student will have been constructed by the data of the testing system, now the prime device for ascertaining what is to count as most true about her. While the student may 'say her name' in the Earthsea sense and lay her true self open to be educated, in the school it is test scores, National Curriculum levels and other similar kinds of data which will powerfully name her when it matters most: for example, when decisions are made about student grouping or examination entry, and when teacher meets parent formally to discuss how the child's educational growth fares.

I want to suggest that a system of comprehensive education requires a door which, like the entrance to the School for Wizards, both is and isn't open, and an attitude to students which is exemplified by the Doorkeeper on Roke.

### **Refusals**

The door to a school in the comprehensive system stands open to every student. Nevertheless, it is closed to certain kinds and applications of thought. If comprehensive education roots itself in values of solidarity rather than of competition, and keeps faith with a commitment to general human educability rather than the educability only of certain groups or kinds of student, then to survive as itself some refusals go on being necessary. Ingress is barred to ways of thinking and being which prevent the realisation in practice of what is aspired to. For example, and to put it paradoxically, a comprehensive system absolutely requires that each student is seen as having neither 'potential' which the school intends fully to realise, nor 'ability' in the sense currently dominant in education. The notion that some thing called 'ability' exists and is distributed such that a proportion of any population will be 'of high ability', a proportion 'of average ability' and a proportion 'of low ability' is not to be granted houseroom. The common coin of any selective system, 'ability'-thinking legitimises those practices of sifting and sorting by which the Otherness of the individual student is re-described in the system's established terms. As such it contributes to the rejection of the student even as it claims her.

Retention of the language of 'ability', or the unexamined use of such language, and the thinking that such language articulates and mobilises, in my view ultimately disarms proponents of comprehensive education. If it is accepted that children arrive at the school door already watermarked by their 'ability', it

becomes harder to argue against the perspective which would segregate students (whether inside a single school or across a variety of selective schools) according to 'ability' in order (it is claimed) better to serve the differing educational needs which differences in 'ability' apparently give rise to and claim to explain. It becomes humane and proper, if the language of 'ability' is accepted, to separate one sort of student from another sort for core educational purposes. Advocates of comprehensive education are forced to fall back on arguments about the value of social mixing in school. Or they find themselves making the case for 'mixed-ability' teaching, and so acquiesce to the discourse of 'ability' (for what is a 'mixed-ability' class if not one made up of groups of students known already to 'be' of different 'abilities') while trying to reform the practice which is its most logical outcome.

Yet neither 'potential' nor 'ability' exists in the sense made use of by 'ability'-thinking and its discourse. The testing system, which purports only to measure or reveal the extent of some pre-existing or reified 'ability' or 'potential', constructs its own object. For what exists is what a student does, says, demonstrates or makes manifest in given circumstances under certain conditions at a certain time, and not fully knowable in advance. Perhaps not known in advance at all, but disclosed in the situation met and the activity undertaken. Not 'ability' but 'abilities', and always in specific contexts and within individual histories, protean not fixed, ever subject to revision and never congruent with the personhood of the student.

To hold to this view requires that the student be comprehended moment by moment as someone not of necessity determined by her 'ability' or any other allegedly pre-loaded innate quantum of 'potential'. So critical attention is turned towards the curriculum and pedagogy, the changeable contexts within which learning is to be enabled. Or, as has in my view tended to happen, within which students are named and made 'predictable', so powerfully determining is the system constructed around them.

### **Emancipated**

As a socially powerful and historically secure intellectual product of class society, 'ability'-thinking might be expected to succour the already-advantaged, enabling them to justify their wealth and power on the basis of their higher 'ability'. A system of comprehensive education consequently remains radical in its embrace of social mixing in so far as its open-door admissions policy is allied to the core belief that educability is not class defined (though it may be hampered by the circumstances class society imposes). This means the comprehensive school does not sanction mechanisms of student grouping or curriculum-offer whose tendency is to ensure social segregation in the guise of academic differentiation. Such a stance runs directly counter to the pressures in the educational structure bequeathed by New Labour and now being intensified by the Coalition.

The movement for a comprehensive education system recognised the sustained historical failure in England of selective education in all its forms to educate the entire school population rather than only a lesser or greater part of it in ways which are fulfilling for the individual, of value within the wider society, and not inadequate to the conception held at this historical moment of what it means to be an educated human being. A system of comprehensive education offers the most supportive and enabling way for all children and any child to learn, know more, attain better and, in the charged phrase of Lawrence Stenhouse, 'be emancipated by the enhancement of their own powers' (Stenhouse, 1983, cited in Pring, 1998, p. 83).

Such an anti-determinist view contradicts the security offered by knowing one's place in the class, and baffles those who consider it possible if not inevitable for 'less able' students to 'hold back' those 'more able'. It offers a wholly different way of thinking about students, learning and society. Certainly any educational structure casts its social shadow, and the reform of education along comprehensive lines would affect the nature of our society in significant and in my view emancipating ways. That it would do so seems to me one of the prime reasons why the Conservative Party has resolutely opposed the implementation of such a system, even where it has tolerated an increase in the number of individual comprehensive schools. The Conservatives remain wedded to selective schooling not only as a long-standing article of policy but also through the lived experience of their current front-line team.

The Coalition Cabinet contains 23 members (18 Tories and 5 LibDems), with five further Conservative MPs attending in various capacities, and a sixth, the Attorney-General Dominic Grieve, 'invited' (according to the Number 10 website) 'to attend when required.' Of these 29 people, 18 went for all or part of their schooling to fee-paying independent or public schools, which educate perhaps 8% of the population as a whole. Of the 11 Cabinet members who were educated in the state sector five attended comprehensives, and five some form of grammar or maintained selective school (including Ken Clarke on a Local Authority scholarship to the fee-paying direct grant Nottingham High School.) Treasury Secretary and Chief Whip Patrick McLoughlin attended a 'faith' school.

The educational profile of the Cabinet, while utterly unrepresentative of the country at large, is at least broadly representative of the Conservative Party in Parliament. Some 54% of Tory MPs went to private schools; for the Liberal Democrats the figure is 40%, for Labour 15%.

### **Remote**

But children usually have very little say in where they go to school. Parents and carers hold the power, and it may be that Cabinet-members and other government ministers who were educated in selective schools have decided their own children will be educated differently. To find out, I wrote to them and asked: what kind of school do you send you child(ren) to?

I wrote over fifty emails. Some members of the House of Lords do not have public email addresses, and David Cameron's is suspended while he occupies the office of Prime Minister, so to these members of the government I wrote letters and enclosed stamped envelopes for their replies. Within a fortnight I received 11 responses, almost a 20% return. Most of those who responded (including two of the four women in the Cabinet) informed me that they had no children. One Cabinet member, and one minister of state, regretted being unable to participate in surveys or questionnaires. Two Liberal Democrats informed me that their children attended 'faith' primary schools and attended, or would attend, state secondary schools which were not Trust schools or Academies. I was informed that the Secretary of State for Education sends both his children to a 'faith' primary school.

Such a mix of responses, and so large a number of non-responses, raises more issues than are settled, of course. Did so many decline to answer because they were newly undertaking an extraordinarily demanding and pressurised job and may have had the desire but not the time to respond to a personal question from someone who was no constituent of theirs? Or did they hold that where their children are schooled is no one's business save their own?

If the latter, I think they are mistaken. For a political representative, acknowledging in public the kind of schooling chosen for his or her own child (without, of course, having to name a specific school) might be thought a duty. It ought to matter to any elite which genuinely wants to take seriously its representative role that its members' experience of education, something central to individual and family life across a long period as well as importantly connected to individual life-chances after school, is so remote from the experience of the great majority. If they had little choice about where they themselves were schooled, the choice they make in that regard about their own children demonstrates the degree to which they are prepared to share in the broad experience of the majority, and so be educated a little more themselves in the lives of those they govern and whom they claim, collectively, to represent.

### References

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Dear Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg

For more than twenty years now, under the mantra of ‘choice and diversity’, Governments have inflicted market values on the education system. This casino planning has led to wider gaps between rich and poor and has largely benefited the ‘select’ at the expense of everyone else.

- •WE REJECT this illusion of ‘choice’, amounting to no choice at all for most people and call for a new agenda that offers inclusion for us all.
- •WE DEMAND a fairer education system. The state should not pay for any form of selection either in the schools it directly finances or through the private schools that it treats as charities. State financed schools should not be allowed to be their own admission authorities and should not be competing with each other for students but collaborating to serve them.
- •WE DEMAND a re-establishment of local accountability of the school system through elected local authorities and elected stakeholder governance of schools.
- •WE DEMAND that all state schools be well-supported with resources, well-trained staff and through a new inspection system focused on providing critical support and encouragement.
- •WE DEMAND that high standards be set nationally by bodies capable of combining the interests of subject professionals and other stakeholders.
- •WE REJECT the hierarchical division of skills into academic and vocational subjects and affirm that well-educated children need both mental and practical skills.
- •WE AFFIRM that only a commitment to a cultured, skilled and inclusive society offers a way out of the recession that faces us and that most of us did not cause.