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## Book Reviews

**The Death of the Comprehensive High School?  
Historical, Contemporary and Comparative Perspectives**  
BARRY M. FRANKLIN & GARY McCULLOCH (Eds), 2007  
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan  
218 pages, £50.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4039-7769-4

FORUM readers may find it difficult to pick up a book with this title; so it is important to note that there *is* a question mark at the end of it. That said, there is not very much in this collection of 10 essays that will allow supporters of the traditional comprehensive school to be either complacent or wildly optimistic. It seems clear that the comprehensive high school faces very real problems and challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century, even if reports of its demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Barry Franklin teaches at Utah State University and Gary McCulloch is Brian Simon Professor of the History of Education at the Institute of Education in London. Of the 10 essays in the book, six focus on the United States, one on Australia, one on New Zealand, one on Scandinavia and one on England and Wales. In their joint Introduction, the Editors argue that these case studies enable us to understand 'some of the tensions and contradictions' affecting the comprehensive school in the principal westernised societies in which it is located.

The 'prime rationale of the comprehensive high school' is seen in this book as being 'to educate pupils of all abilities and aptitudes within the same educational institution in order to provide equality of opportunity for all' (p. 3). This is the prototype for the comprehensive school developed in the United States which, initially at least, had no obvious equivalent in Europe, where moves to extend the scope of secondary education took the form of providing *separate* types of school. This was the point made by James Bryant Conant in his 1959 book, *The American High School Today*, where he proudly announced that 'the American High School has become an institution which has *no* counterpart in any other country'. He went on to argue:

Though generalisation about American public education is highly dangerous ... I believe it accurate to state that a high school accommodating all the youth of a community is typical of American public education. I think it's safe to say that the comprehensive high

school is characteristic of our society and, further, that it has come into being because of our economic history and our devotion to the ideas of equality of opportunity and equality of status.

It is fair to say that the last fifty years have seen a good deal of public disenchantment in America with this noble vision dating from 1959. Can the comprehensive high school be said to be 'characteristic of American society', and should it be allowed to 'accommodate all the youth of a community'? Many still believe that the wide accessibility of the comprehensive high school has made it the pre-eminent instrument for advancing equal opportunity in America and ultimately America democracy itself. But others have been highly critical of the high school's attempt to serve everyone. They argue that the effort of high school leaders to provide for *all* students has led to the establishment of a bewildering multitude of programmes and the delivery of a fragmented curriculum that lacks a unified purpose and focus. At the same time, there is the familiar refrain, also much in evidence in England, that the attempt to create an institution that is responsive to the needs of *all* students leads inevitably to the abandonment of academic rigour and high standards.

It is not perhaps surprising that two of the chapters which express the deepest reservations about the comprehensive high school concept belong in the section on America: an essay by Rene Antrop González & Anthony De Jesus on the schooling of student of colour, and particularly of Latino youth; and an essay by Thomas C. Pedroni on African-American support for private school vouchers.

The attitude towards the large urban high school shared by Rene Antrop González & Anthony De Jesus is made abundantly clear in the opening sentence of their chapter on the subject: 'We unequivocally declare death on the social institution known as the large comprehensive urban high school, because it has miserably failed students of colour, particularly of Latina/o youth' (p. 74). They go on to argue that school reformers should 'steer their pedagogical and political efforts' towards small schools of colour which 'have the potential to serve urban youth of colour and the communities they call home' (p. 90).

The essay by Thomas C. Pedroni examines the process by which African American working-class families in Milwaukee, Wisconsin use vouchers as a means of removing their children from public secondary schools that they perceive to be 'unacceptable'. By using vouchers, parents are apparently able to choose small schools with smaller class sizes, which offer 'the individualised attention, differentiated curriculum and strict disciplinary practices that best serve their children' (p. 125).

There are two excellent chapters in this wide-ranging collection which will be of special interest to *FORUM* readers: one by Susanne Wiborg on the uneven development of comprehensive education in the countries of Scandinavia, and the other by David Crook charting the history of the comprehensive (or multilateral) school movement in England and Wales.

The argument put forward by Dr Wiborg is a distillation of the thesis propounded in her book *Education and Social Integration*, which is reviewed elsewhere in this number of *FORUM*. First of all, it is a remarkable fact that, in recent decades, the countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden have been unique in sharing an unusually radical type of school system, which can be usefully defined as an almost universal public school system, comprising all-through, unselective comprehensive schools with mixed-ability classes covering the entire compulsory school age range. The system described by Dr Wiborg is one where almost all children, irrespective of social background, attend a comprehensive school for common learning, and selection to various forms of further education is postponed until the age of 15 or 16. Pupils can sometimes be grouped according to 'ability' within the framework of mixed-ability classes, but only for a limited amount of time during the school term. Private schools have actually been growing in number over the last few years, but still constitute a comparatively small sector.

What, then, accounts for this remarkable state of affairs? There may, of course, be factors peculiar to each individual country, but Susanne Wiborg argues that broadly speaking an overall comparative explanation has much to do with the unique political tradition of consensus-seeking politics between the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties. She argues that 'the making of the peasantry into an independent class that subsequently constituted the Liberal Party, with socially liberal views strong enough to crush the Right, and the rise of a Social Democratic Party that was able to weld an alliance with the Liberals goes far in explaining how a radical tradition of education could be introduced through broad coalitions' (p. 43).

Dr Wiborg does not deal with the Tory Party's current obsession with Swedish-style parent-run state schools, but she does point out that there is a question-mark over the future of Scandinavia's unique education structure. In her words: 'A neoliberal turn in education politics during the last ten years or so may undermine the principle of comprehensive education in the future' (p. 143).

David Crook's thought-provoking chapter points out that across the length and breadth of England, the words 'comprehensive school', which would once have featured on so many end-of-driveway entrance signs, have been steadily vanishing. 'Today', he says, 'the former 'Bash Street Comprehensive School' is more likely to be styled 'Bash Street College of Technology' (or perhaps of Arts, Engineering, Languages or Sport). It may even be the 'Bash Street Academy' (p. 147).

New Labour has shown no support for the traditional comprehensive school, with Tony Blair announcing, in his Speech to the 2002 Labour Party Conference, that the days of the comprehensive school were now over. 'We need', he said, 'to move to the post-comprehensive era, where schools keep the comprehensive principle of "equality of opportunity", but where we open up the system to new and different ways of education, built around the needs of the individual child'.

It is true that, from the outset, the term 'comprehensive' has had a multitude of meanings in England and Wales. Brian Simon believed passionately in the idea of the 'neighbourhood comprehensive school', whereas others emphasised *social* and *political* aims directed towards creating a more 'egalitarian' or 'cohesive' society. But we now seem to have reached the stage where the very idea of 'comprehensive' is being stretched to absurd limits. In his Evidence to a House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills in December 2005, Sir Cyril Taylor, Chairperson of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, argued that 'the specialist schools movement is all about comprehensive education ... The headteachers of these schools, which do not serve clearly-defined neighbourhoods and, in some cases, select a proportion of their pupils, nevertheless passionately support the concept of comprehensive education'.

David Crook ends his chapter by arguing that the one-time view that *all* the secondary-age children of a particular area should attend their local comprehensive has become a sort of historical curiosity, and he wonders whether it is possible to have comprehensive *education* in the twenty-first century without the existence of comprehensive *schools*. It is, of course, possible for the needs of young people in any given area to be met by more than one institution, but the arrangement has to be 'comprehensive' in concept and we have to rid ourselves of the damaging individualist mentality and culture fostered by New Labour and enthusiastically adopted by the new Government.

This is a very important book, even though it often raises more questions than it answers.

Clyde Chitty

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**Home is Where One Starts From: one woman's memoir**

BARBARA TIZARD, 2010

Edinburgh: Word Power Books

320 pages, £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-9549-1858-3

This enthralling memoir is testimony to a bygone age, the years between the two world wars of the twentieth century; to the courage and contradictions of a socialist upbringing at a time when, for 'declared socialists' such as Barbara Tizard's parents and grandparents, socialism was 'not just a matter of voting for the Labour Party and reading the Labour newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, but 'the medium in which they lived'; and to the fierce determination of a proudly independent child to live life as she will.

Barbara Tizard was born in 1926, two weeks before the start of the General Strike. Both her parents came from working-class families and 'both through better education had moved out of the working-class'. Her father, a Labour councillor who had stood for parliament in the 1924 election, was opposed in principle to the idea of a general strike, while her mother supported

it. But the family was preoccupied with the increasing violence of a marriage that was heading for disaster. At the time of their marriage Barbara's father was joint editor of the newly founded *Radio Times*, and later he worked as a journalist on the *Daily Herald* while his wife to be was a teacher at a senior elementary school in West Ham, where the family lived.

A year after Barbara was born her mother decided to return to work, alarmed by her husband's mounting debts, heavy drinking and extravagant lifestyle, and Barbara and her elder brother Michael were looked after by a series of maids and relatives. 'Unsurprisingly we did not remember our early years as happy', Barbara tells us. Her brother is more direct: 'we had a bloody awful childhood'. Barbara was hard to love, 'being not only a very faddy eater but also much given to tantrums'. She hated dolls and doesn't remember playing at all, or being played with by adults. Almost her one good memory is of her parents reading to her: 'They passed on to us a life-long love of reading and we both learned to read very early. My mother read and re-read to us many times the Christopher Robin verses and stories and *Peter Pan*, my father read us the *Just So Stories*, *Treasure Island*, and *Kidnapped*'. It was the beginning of a lifelong passion for books.

The marriage finally ended in 1932 and in 1933, just seven and a half years old, Barbara was sent to a small, private boarding school in Felixstowe, the first of three private schools in which she spent her schooldays. Why did her mother choose a private education for Barbara, as she already had for Barbara's brother? Partly because her political and union activities frequently took her away from home and she did not intend to give them up; partly because 'she had a great desire to give us a better education than she had had, or was then available in West Ham'. Barbara spent a miserable three years at Quarndon House. She continued to develop a passion for reading, and she loved drama, 'but most of the time', she writes, 'I was desperately unhappy. Every minute of our lives was regulated in a strict routine, and any infringement was punished. I doubt whether modern penitentiaries are as tightly regimented'.

After three years Barbara's mother decided, for reasons which she never explained to her daughter, to move her to Bedford High School for Girls, where she enjoyed the competitive atmosphere – 'since I usually came first in most subjects' – but hated the emphasis on sport – 'The 'team spirit' seemed to me absurd and I refused to join in the cheering and support for the class/boarding house/or school teams'. It was here that she first became labelled a 'Red'. The occasion was a classroom discussion of socialism in which teacher and pupils were united in their scorn. 'Having grown up in a socialist household, this incensed me', she writes, 'especially since as a result of many discussions at home I had by this time decided that I was a socialist myself. So I got to my feet and at some length held forth on why Britain should become a socialist society. I was unabashed by the general hostility to my views, and in fact I felt quite brave, and proud of myself, enjoying the role of agitator'.

The role and the conviction remained and deepened throughout the rest of her schooldays and beyond. In 1938 she moved schools again, this time to St

Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, a private day school which she attended throughout the war years. It was an exceptionally difficult time at which to be moving through secondary school and Barbara Tizard describes, in vivid detail, the periodic evacuation, the Blitz, the frequent changes of house, the rationing and her own growing political conviction. She remained defiantly independent, so much so that she could be described by an ex-St Paul's Oxford undergraduate as 'the most unmanageable girl they ever had at St Paul's'. But she seems to have thrived on her reputation. Between 1942 and 1944 she attended the sixth form conferences organised by the Council for Education in World Citizenship and they became a very important part of her life. 'For the first time I was not a lone eccentric with an interest in politics and left-wing views, but surrounded by contemporaries just as knowledgeable and just as involved as myself.'

In 1944 she went up to Oxford, intending to study medicine but she found the course insufferable and after a year she switched to PPE [politics, philosophy, and economics]. Her account of Oxford during the four years of her life there is compelling. The Communist Party became a major part of her life, determining her friendships and the entire pattern of her days. It was at Oxford that she met Jack Tizard, a New Zealander who had arrived in England in 1946, intending to take a doctorate in psychology with Cyril Burt but quickly shifting to social history with G.D.H. Cole. They fell in love and were married in the December of Barbara's final year, against the wishes of Barbara's mother, who tried her utmost to dissuade her daughter. The following summer Barbara took finals but failed to get the first-class degree which her tutors had predicted for her. She left Oxford unhappy about her degree and her mother's rejection but the disappointment was short-lived. 'When I looked back later at my student days', she concludes, 'I mostly remember the beauty of the colleges, the intellectual interest of the course, the relative freedom to organise one's time and above all the rich social life – never again is one likely to spend so much time with such a large circle of friends, so readily available'.

The memoir concludes with a lengthy postscript summarizing Barbara Tizard's later career but it is the account of her upbringing and education that dominates. The book is full of rich descriptions of the social life of Barbara's childhood and youth: of going to the cinema in the years before the war; of food and meals in a working-class family in the thirties, when Barbara lived with her brother and mother in her working-class grandparents' house in West Ham; of rationing during and after the war years; of the Blitz, the bombing and the air raid shelters; of a holiday in Paris shortly after the war, at the beginning of the Dior New Look; of Oxford tutorials with Christopher Hill who always arranged Barbara's tutorials for 12 noon and, after she had read her essay aloud, would get out the sherry while the two of them spent the rest of the time 'drinking and chatting about the subject of the essay and Oxford affairs'; of relationships between the sexes; of adolescent embarrassments and of deep, though not always long-lasting, friendships.

Many well-known figures feature briefly in the narrative. There was Lloyd George, whom Barbara heard speak at the NUT conference in 1939 when her mother was ex-president and her children sat with her on the platform. 'I was sitting immediately behind him on the platform and what I remember most is his shoulder length silver, silky hair and saying to myself, "You must remember this. You are listening to one of the greatest British orators." His voice was indeed musical and his style dramatic, but I can't remember a word he said'.

And there was Margaret Thatcher, who was studying chemistry in the year above Barbara's at Somerville College, Oxford. 'I mainly remember her as an energetic recruiter for the Conservative club, always bustling about, organizing people, leaping up and down during meal times ... A girl who had been at grammar school with her said she was known there as "What's your percentage Margaret." Apparently each girl was given an overall percentage for their school work at the end of term, and Margaret would rush around asking all the other girls what their percentage was, intent on telling them how well she had done, and anxious that no-one should have done better'. And Sir Cyril Burt, then Professor of Psychology at University College, London. 'Short, plump and self important, he would declaim his lectures whilst strutting up and down the middle aisle of the lecture room. He wore, perhaps to assume the status of medical authority, a short white doctor's jacket from which his round stomach protruded, his thumbs sticking out of the jacket pockets.'

In 1938, Barbara's mother, who is in many ways the book's disconcerting hero, became president of the NUT. For her presidential address she chose, rather than teachers' salaries and conditions, to speak on 'the education of working-class children and the role of education in the defence of freedom'. 'It must be our aim', she declared, 'to liberate the human spirit, by giving children complete freedom to develop the gifts with which Nature has endowed them'. This, she argued, requires freeing children from the effects of poverty, undernourishment, lack of sleep and overcrowding. It also requires a reform of the educational system. Children cannot be free to develop whilst our schools mirror the class structure of society with the "fateful examination" at eleven, which labels ninety per cent as failures. My mother went on to attack the nature of the education offered in schools, particularly its structuring around examinations. This, she believed, led to too much emphasis on academic studies. Moreover, examinations "promote self-seeking, selfishness, and competitiveness," and "discourage true cooperation and mutual help." The curriculum should also be reformed, since it was overcrowded, and "devised by pedantic minds, instead of being fitted to the child." All this must change if schools are to produce "free citizens of a free and democratic state, trained in those attributes of moral courage and intellectual honesty which distinguish men from helots ... As soon as we cease to practise independent thought and judgement and to encourage these in our children both we and they will fall victims to the evils of dictatorship".

Elsie Vera Parker, Barbara Tizard's mother, was an early advocate of multilateral schools and her presidential address marks her out as one of the

founding heroes of comprehensive education, for all that she sent her own two children to private schools where 'high achievement and exam success were the main, though not the only, priorities'. It is humbling to recognise how far, after almost a century, the problems and the challenges remain the same.

This is a wonderful book, the kind of historical narrative that not only gives testimony to the past but bears witness to the problems of the present and the possibilities of the future. Through one woman's memoir, as the title has it, an entire culture is brought close to us, a culture that may now seem very remote. In the preface Barbara Tizard speaks of herself as 'a survivor of a long line of people I used to be, though I haven't lost touch with them'. Her memoir ensures the survival of them all, and of ourselves with them.

**Michael Armstrong**

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**Education and Social Integration:  
comprehensive schooling in Europe**

SUSANNE WIBORG, 2009

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

246 pages, £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4039-8371-8

In 2004, Andy Green & Susanne Wiborg contributed an important chapter on 'Comprehensive Schooling and Educational Inequality' to a collection of essays with the title *Education and Democracy*, edited by Melissa Benn and myself and designed to celebrate the life and work of Caroline Benn who died at the end of 2000. In this essay, Green and Wiborg made use of data provided by OECD Surveys to gain a clear estimation of the effects of different school systems on educational inequality across countries. They concluded on the bases of this data that what the more equal countries had in common, which was absent in the less equal countries, were 'the structures and processes typically associated with radical versions of comprehensive education: non-selective schools, mixed-ability classes, late subject specialisation and measures to equalise resources between schools' (Green & Wiborg, 2004, pp. 239-240).

It is, of course, true that inequalities in educational achievement by different social groups *arise* partly because of the unequal learning advantages given to children from different social backgrounds. This is the standard argument of 'cultural capital theory', often associated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to this theory, children from middle-class families with higher levels of education and more 'cultural capital' have acquired more of the cultural 'habitus' and linguistic sophistication required to get on in the school system. They are likely to have more confidence and higher aspirations than is the case with 'less advantaged' children and often have the assistance of their parents in learning how to navigate and manipulate



the education system. But this is *only part* of the picture: *school structures* also make a difference.

Concentrating on the emergence of comprehensive education in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway and Sweden), England and Germany from the eighteenth century to the present day, *Education and Social Integration* looks at the reasons why a state system of education can vary so much from one country to another.

It seems that the key to understanding this uneven development is to be found in the strength of Social Democratic political parties and in the genuine alliances they are able to form with Liberal groups. The Scandinavian countries have had strong Social Democratic parties that have been able to form lasting alliances with Liberal parties; and this has fostered the successful development of comprehensive systems of schooling. England and Germany, on the other hand, have not had strong ideologically secure Social Democratic groups, and meaningful alliances with Liberal parties have usually proved impossible to negotiate.

Political factors such as these must, of course, be viewed alongside social and economic issues. Comprehensive education both *reflects* and *enhances* social cohesion. The relative homogeneity of Scandinavia societies has so far acted as a favourable factor in the promotion of genuine comprehensive schools; and such schools, in turn, have been seen as a necessary vehicle for creating social and cultural cohesion.

Prussia, and then Germany, has had a divided education system underpinned by its divided social class structure. After the Second World War, a tripartite secondary education system was re-established, which has now survived virtually intact for the past half-century or so. It comprises the *Gymnasium* (the equivalent of the English grammar school), the *Realschule*, which is more technically oriented, and the *Hauptschule* (or secondary modern school). It is true that during the 1960s and 1970s, major reform plans were drawn up that were aimed at restructuring the school system along egalitarian lines; but none of these plans actually resulted in significant changes to the system. The *Gesamtschule*, or comprehensive school, has never been popular in Germany, and today accounts for the schooling of no more than 10% of the secondary age population. After the unification of Germany, in 1990, the former East German states abandoned their polytechnic comprehensive schools that had been introduced under the Communist regime, in order to adopt the Western model of three main types of secondary school. Some of the *Länder*, or states, have managed to ward off criticism of the divided system by enrolling more secondary-age students in the *Gymnasium* or *Realschule* and fewer in the traditional low-achievers' *Hauptschule*, but the German system remains highly stratified and elitist.

It is sometimes argued that the popularity of technical and vocational education (*Arbeitslehre*), accompanied by the steady growth of *Realschule*, helps to explain why there has been little demand for comprehensive schooling in Germany; but Dr Wiborg thinks that too much can be made of this. It is

certainly true that the situation in England and Wales has been very different where, as late as 1958, secondary technical schools still contained under 4% of the relevant age group and where David Young's attempts to promote technical and vocational education in the 1980s met with fierce opposition from the powerful grammar school lobby. In other words, the tripartite system has never been a reality in England.

Dr Wiborg points out that England was remarkably late in developing a *national* system of state education. Even after 1870, when the Forster Education Act laid the first foundations of a *national* system, there were still many influential writers and politicians who questioned the principle of *universality* in the provision of elementary schooling. She draws heavily on the work of Andy Green in arguing that the failure to develop a *national* system until very late in the day in England was the result of the *specific nature* of the country's state formation, where *laissez-faire* liberalism continued to mount powerful arguments against the increasing power of the State.

Dr Wiborg is certainly right to point out that the development of political parties in England in no way resembles the growth of the political system in Scandinavia and that this has played a key role in *inhibiting* the growth of egalitarian structures.

For one thing, there has always been a significant 'faultline' in the British Liberal Party; and its support for comprehensive schooling has never been unequivocal. There are 'Social Liberals' who want to use the state in an *active* way to promote social reform and 'progressive' policies, and there are 'Classical Liberals' or Neoliberals who are much more suspicious of state intervention and would like to privatise health and education. It is these 'free-market' Liberals who have been in the ascendant since Dr Wiborg wrote her book and she has been able to witness a situation where right-wingers like Vince Cable, Nick Clegg and David Laws – all contributors to the 2004 Orange Book, *Reclaiming Liberalism* – have felt able to enter into a coalition government with David Cameron's Conservatives.

At the same time, the Labour Party in England has never behaved like Social Democratic parties in Scandinavia. A significant part of the leadership has never been happy with the idea of the comprehensive school; and there has always been an obsession with the role of the grammar school in providing a sort of 'ladder of opportunity' for working-class children. The Labour peer Helena Kennedy recently took part in a discussion on BBC Radio Four's *Woman's Hour* extolling the part played by the post-war girls' grammar schools in furthering the cause of girls' education.

Dr Wiborg is not able to go into recent developments in Europe in much detail, but we do seem to have reached the point where even in parts of Scandinavia, free-market values are carrying all before them. The new Coalition Government in Britain seems to be pre-occupied with the idea of Swedish-style 'free schools'; but it would be nice to think that Scandinavian countries are able to withstand the growing commodification of education.

This important book has much to tell us about the structures that can be deemed to be 'successful' from both a social and an educational point of view. It will prove of great interest to *FORUM* readers.

**Clyde Chitty**

*Reference*

Green, A. & Wiborg, S. (2004) Comprehensive Schooling and Educational Inequality: an international perspective, in M. Benn & C. Chitty (Eds) *A Tribute to Caroline Benn: essays in education and democracy*, pp. 217-242. London: Continuum.

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