

---

## Moving in Darkness: back to the future at Crown Woods College

NOTE At the end of July *The Guardian* reported on the recently opened Crown Woods College in Eltham, South-East London. The College had been rebuilt on the site of the previous Crown Woods School with £50 million of funding via the Building Schools for the Future project. Its nine buildings include four 'mini-schools', one of which is a sixth form, alongside a state-of-the-art gym, a building for children with moderate learning difficulties, special educational needs (SEN) or visual impairment, and a technology and design centre. Media interest was aroused by the way the College had extended its previous policy of streaming students by 'ability'. Each mini-school (leaving aside the sixth form) operates separately from the others and is populated by students deemed to be only of a particular 'ability'. Since each mini-school has its own uniform, Crown Woods College students are effectively identified in public by 'ability', with mini-school populations prevented from mixing. *The Guardian's* headline was: 'School Colour-Codes Pupils by Ability'. *The Guardian's* report, which generated some 250 comments, was picked up by other newspapers. Elements of the original were reproduced on blog sites and Internet-discussion forums. In an article also published by *The Guardian*, FORUM board member Melissa Benn took up some of the issues raised by the public funding of a segregated state school. We reproduce that article, along with a piece by fellow board member Patrick Yarker, who taught English at Crown Woods school.

### **Moving in Darkness: back to the future at Crown Woods College**

**PATRICK YARKER**

Crown Woods School was where I learned to teach. Built in the first wave of comprehensivisation, and one of the biggest schools in London, Crown Woods quickly developed a pioneering reputation under head teacher Malcolm Ross. It had a large sixth form, an on-site 'farm' tended by students, a 'ham' radio station, a potter's wheel and kiln, and a boarding wing. One of its early Directors of Studies was Michael Marland, described by *The Guardian* obituarist

as: 'a pioneer in school management' and 'a vigorous advocate of the comprehensive ideal'. Marland's commitment to comprehensive principles endured after he left Crown Woods, as did his legacy of curricular innovation, not least in the English Department of which he had been head.

I joined that department in October 1982. In the preceding decade my colleagues had helped pilot Mode 3 CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) in order that students deemed unable to secure an O level grade might nevertheless leave school with a useful qualification in English. In the eighties we helped establish the 100% coursework GCSE, a syllabus which boosted student motivation and engagement and allowed teachers to develop curricular content in tandem with pedagogic practice. This way of conceiving teaching was the polar opposite of today's dominant view that teachers should 'deliver' content decided by others. Profoundly committed to, skilled in, and successful via 'mixed-ability' teaching, the department maintained itself as a proving ground not only for English examiners and inspectors, but for future leaders in secondary education. Several of my contemporaries now head English departments or serve on school leadership teams. At least two run comprehensives in ways which strive, in the teeth of prevailing conditions, to remain faithful to the educational values once enshrined at Crown Woods.

The school I knew and worked in for almost twenty years has been razed to the ground. In its place Crown Woods College has opened. The new establishment betrays the heritage its name evokes by building into its very fabric a way of regarding and knowing students which the comprehensive movement set out to dethrone and supersede.

### **Only Select**

The new College segregates. Its students are divided among four mini-schools on a single site. One mini-school is for sixth form students. The remaining three are colour-coded and discretely-organised; their students wear distinct uniforms, follow distinct programmes of study, and by design do not share their school day with peers in the other mini-schools. Each is a school apart. For the mini-schools are set up on the principle that children can and should be sorted into three kinds of student: most able, averagely able, least able. It's the old milk bottle principle: gold top, silver top, red top, and it wouldn't do to mix.

Crown Woods College presents its mini-schools as an exercise in 'human-scale education'. It's an odd kind of theft which snatches the bag for its brand while throwing out the contents! The College's approach has nothing to do with implementing the Human Scale Education movement's dedication to more democratic practices in school, nor with attempting to incubate within the constraints of the existing system a progressive pedagogy. The old school could lay claim now and again to having attempted something along those lines. But the new College is all too Old School here. The beginning and end of its approach is academic selection.

Many schools separate their students into 'ability' sets and, increasingly, into 'ability' streams. They do so under the one roof. Theoretically, students designated 'least able' can still mingle at break with those named 'most able'. They can share mealtimes, and regularly assemble together as part of a single corpus. They wear the same uniform. Crown Woods College turns its face away even from token notions of a shared community. The College stands as a particularly overt monument to the discourse of 'ability', about which I wrote in the previous issue of this journal. It segregates its students for all to see, and for the whole school day. It fences them off in their 'ability' zones, dividing friend from friend and imposing pre-packaged futures according to a long-discredited theory of how children learn.

My hunch is that the American poet Robert Frost isn't taught much in any of the divided zones of Crown Woods College. Else these lines from his poem 'Mending Wall' might have given some pause:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out  
And to whom I was like to give offence.

### **The Needs of Backward Children**

Not that a concern to avoid giving offence has been more than superficially important to those who like dividing cohorts of learners once and for all into who can, who might, and who can't. It is always well to recall that the tripartite division of children comes with its own historical lexicon. In the 1930s and 40s, the future to which Crown Woods College has so expensively returned, the discourse of 'ability' based itself four-square on the Intelligence Quotient and classified children accordingly. Some children were bright, others normal, and yet others 'dull'. Or 'backward'. Or 'feeble-minded'. Or 'sub-normal'. Or 'imbeciles and idiots who can find no useful place in a modern industrial community' (quotations are from a 68-page pamphlet published by the Board of Education in 1938). The contemporary Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers had given 'considerable prominence ... to the needs of backward children' but more was required to support the teaching of such students. 'The Education of Backward Children, with special reference to children who are backward because they are dull' (Board of Education, 1938) was prepared by 'H.M. Inspectors who have made a special study of the subject'. These inspectors found:

Many children who have relatively low IQs have other gifts which will enable them to go through life as independent and useful citizens, and it is extremely unsafe to label any person as generally and finally dull on the basis of a verbal intelligence test ... When we have established the fact that a child has a low IQ we may rightly conclude that he will never reach the more abstract planes of thought, but we may be wholly wrong in assuming that he will

therefore be ineffective in all the simpler activities of body and mind that fill the greater part of everyone's life. When abstract thought is not required he may be alert, sure, and even ingenious ... Nevertheless there is general agreement that children whose IQs are less than 85 ... constitute a serious educational problem. They cannot keep pace with normal children in the 'Three R's', and in later life they will use them only in their simplest form and to a very limited extent. That is to say, they will always be educationally backward, whatever may be done for them, and their hopes of living a satisfactory life will depend upon the development of other than scholastic abilities. As a rule those persons whose IQs fall between 85 and 70, whom we call 'the dull', are able to perform certain tasks calling for a limited degree of initiative and responsibility, but they will always need a certain amount of sympathetic supervision if they are to remain efficient.

Nowadays some would laud this as tough love. Many rehearse the same rhetorical moves: academic ability isn't everything; the child will have 'other gifts', without, of course, being gifted. Only cultivate these and she will still be 'independent, useful ...'

The unwavering certainty that the child is 'dull', 'backward', slow, unable, provides the well-spring for a cataract of concern about that child's quality of life, future prospects and hopes. So the original enormous act of condescension and belittling, the initial and final diminishment of the child within the education system, is left behind in the rush to remedy. For once produced as 'dull' or 'unable', the child is always lacking:

will never reach... abstract thought not required ... a serious educational problem ... cannot keep pace ... very limited ... always educationally backward ... limited degree of initiative and responsibility ... will always need ...

### **Silent Teaching**

Today's version shares with those Inspectors of the 1930s a similar method and perspective. The child is produced as lacking, and society is reassured that the school will do its best to prepare her for remaining economically efficient. Crown Woods College's prospectus, website and promotional video talk a lot about personalised learning and attending to 'needs', using a fashionable language of care to distract from the originating moment of abuse which produces the child as a member of the 'suitable' mini-school: Ashdown, or Sherwood, or Delamere; red top, silver top, gold top. Personalised learning in this context is a scaled-down application of the general policy of segregation, fitting the student to what the school decrees as needful, and denying the value or efficacy of communal or shared engagement in a more diversified rather than more homogeneous setting. That is, the College holds you cannot learn from

your friends or peers who have scored significantly better, or less well, in a set of tests. Such learning is either impossible by nature or somehow detrimental to one of the parties. Students are taught this before a word is uttered. They are taught it by the way their College is configured on the ground, by the way they are segregated into colour-coded mini-schools, and then re-divided into 'ability' streams within each school. Such silent teaching suggests the College understands education to be all one way, something dispensed by the teacher. The College, diagnosing student need and lack, offers to provide the cure. For the cure to take, diagnosis must be accurate, hence segregation through mini-schools and then streaming within each mini-school. Only classify the child aright and suitable education may be administered in the correct dose.

I am reminded of the good neighbour in Frost's poem, who appears:

Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me  
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

### **Crown and Pelican**

So far as I can tell, the Crown Woods logo (or crest as we used to style it) has been changed. The College Prospectus sports a crown now. The mini-schools are still named for the royal forests, like the 'houses' into which in my day the two thousand or so students were divided: Ashdown, Sherwood, Delamere and Arden. There used to be four more. And a different crest. Above a nest of leaves reminiscent of a crown, a pelican, its beak engaged bloodily in stabbing its own flank. This act of self-harm had a symbolic (indeed, a Christian) meaning, all the new Year 7 students were told. In the Middle Ages it was believed the pelican shed its own blood to feed or revivify its young. It is an image of nourishing, of giving life. It signifies the nature of the relationship between school and student. A paradoxical image, to be sure, and hence one all the more likely to encourage thought.

Such an image has been rightly abandoned. It would ill-adorn Crown Wood College, whose approach to its own young begins with hierarchical classification by 'ability', a kind of educational death-dealing, and continues via the many denials and withholdings which attend outright segregation. Far from helping meet needs, this way of seeing and knowing students imposes more difficulties. It prevents rather than enables. As has long been understood, it also works to reproduce those intransigent social inequities it claims to be the means of ameliorating. For the new College the new crown logo is a much better fit. Image of an outworn counter-democratic institution of authority, it reminds us, subjects not citizens, of our history and our place in the scheme of things. And hence of our consequent obligation: to establish one common education system based on equal rights and access, and on a resolute refusal to see children through the lens of 'ability' and know them thus, with all which that entails.

### References

- Board of Education (1938) *The Education of Backward Children, with special reference to children who are backward because they are dull*. Educational pamphlet no. 112. London: HMSO.
- Davis, R. (2011) School Colour-Codes Pupils by Ability, *The Guardian*, 25 July.  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jul/25/secondary-school-streaming>
- 

### **What follows is reproduced by kind permission of *The Guardian*, where it first appeared on 8 August 2011**

Long ago, when I started at my shiny new comprehensive, our year group was divided into twelve classes, comprising four ability streams. Most of the white, middle class children were placed in the top bands while the poor, black or transient pupils were largely put in the bottom streams. By our third year in secondary school, streaming had been abolished in favour of a mixed ability approach. But the damaging labels endured, throughout our school lives and beyond.

Several decades on, and the wheel has apparently turned full circle. Streaming, the wholesale allocation of children to groups on the basis of a fixed, single ability label, is making a big comeback, part of the retro traditionalism currently sweeping our education system. According to a recent study from the Institute of Education, one in six primary age children within the UK is now streamed by the age of seven.

In some schools, the practice is so extreme as to amount to a return of the grammar school principle. Crown Woods School in south London has caused a furore, most recently in these pages, for its decision to house children in 'schools within schools', according to so-called ability, each with its own colour-coded uniform. Fighting has already been reported between students located in different blocks.

But there's a twisted logic behind the Crown Woods scenario. Surrounded by selective or partially selective schools, and struggling to stay atop the league tables, the school is merely responding to the market. In today's competitive climate, more and more schools are caught up in local turf wars, trying to win their share of high achieving pupils.

Educationally speaking, however, this is pure disaster. Researching the recent history of UK schooling, I was fascinated to discover how much of the 1944 Education Act was based on the IQ work of educational psychologist Sir Cyril Burt, whose research was later discredited.

In the words of one sceptical civil servant of the time, Burt believed 'that children were divided into three kinds. It was sort of Platonic. There were

golden children, silver children and iron children'. Each was to be assigned to different institutions – grammar, secondary modern or the technical schools – according to these rigidly, unimaginative descriptors.

We've come a long way from then – or have we? Certainly, all the current international evidence points powerfully in the opposite direction. The highest performing, and fairest school systems, in the world delay specialisation and setting – the grouping of children into different classes for different subjects – until much later in adolescence.

Academic Jo Boaler followed two groups of young adolescents in the mid 90s, one separated into rigid ability groups, the other, taught in mixed ability groupings. Not only did the mixed ability students outperform those who had been put into separate groups, in national examinations, but when Boaler tracked down a representative sample from both schools, she found the mixed ability group had achieved more social mobility, in relation to their own parents, than their streamed peers. Escaping early labelling had clearly expanded their sense of confidence into young adult life while those who had been streamed talked, famously, of 'psychological prisons' from which they never escaped.

Wroxham primary school in Hertfordshire has outlawed all ability labelling, including reference to the all pervasive National Curriculum levels. Head Alison Peacock has taken the school from special measures to outstanding status in a few years, and produced cohorts of confident, inquiring learners.

Wroxham is part of an exciting project called Learning Without Limits, that promotes a more open ended and progressive view of human potential. Such work is particularly vital in the current climate, with so many siren voices declaring even 'mixed ability teaching' a complete failure. The irony, as Learning Without Limits understands, is that even to talk of 'mixed ability' is to constrain and categorise, in unimaginative fashion, what we believe the child is capable of learning.

Something vital is at stake in all these arguments, not just about the quality of learning in our schools, but the kind of school system, and society, we ultimately want to foster. For all its rhetoric about improving the education of poorer children, many of the Coalition's reforms risk returning us to rigid, know your place, limiting, hierarchies. Now, more than ever, we need to keep alive the theory and practice of rich, alternative visions.

**MELISSA BENN**

