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Comprehensive Schools and the Future

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ABSTRACT This article argues that comprehensive reorganisation was not a one-off policy reform but a complex, bottom-up campaign for equity and fairness in education, with varied consequences and outcomes. Recent battles over student fees, free schools and academies show that the quest for democratic education does not lead to a permanent achievement but to perpetual struggle with privileged groups who feel themselves threatened by social justice.

Comprehensive education developed within and for particular historical conditions and these are likely to confound retrospective judgements about policy mistakes, lost ideals and models for the future.

Labour's circular 10/65 requested rather than prescribed all-ability schools, with the result that progress depended on a variety of changing circumstances, including the uncertain attitude of local and national politicians. The comprehensive movement was curiously bi-partisan and 'bottom-up', with Conservative Hertfordshire and Sussex reorganising earlier than most. Harold Wilson, the Labour Prime Minister whose governments appeared to encourage the comprehensive advance, said grammar schools would be abolished 'over my dead body'. Although the 1970 Heath government withdrew circular 10/65, Margaret Thatcher subsequently created more comprehensives than did any other Secretary of State.

Although Caroline Benn and Brian Simon reported in 1970 that local authorities were *Halfway There*, a comprehensive regime was never fully established. Reorganisation produced local diversity rather than a national system, with grammar schools continuing to cream their neighbours in many areas. In the medium term, the failure to ensure equity between schools meant that selection by postcode gradually replaced selection by ability. Despite this mixture of compromise and patchwork, the principle of equal worth was established and expectations rose, especially amongst families and children frustrated by the 11+ examination.

Comprehensive schools became the unacknowledged agent of an historic increase in educational opportunity, especially for girls and women whose

participation in sixth form and higher education was severely restricted. Grammar school places were limited to around 20% of each cohort, so that most children born in the 1940s and 1950s were unable to enter post-16 education and degree-awarding institutions. Able girls were held back because 11+ marks were adjusted to ensure a similar number of males and females in academic schools. Reorganisation removed these barriers, enabling a tenfold increase in higher education that could not have been achieved without extending opportunity to a much greater proportion of the population than was possible under selection. For most children, grammar schools were not an avenue to success but a rationing mechanism that institutionalised disadvantage.

Participation in public examinations and higher education grew exponentially, as campaigners expected, but success was not enough when the climate changed. Comprehensive schools thrived while the desire for a better life and improved status could be expressed in egalitarian language, with an emphasis on fairness and opportunity, but struggled as inequality deepened, by 40% between 1974 and 2006. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2010) explains the consequences:

> With great inequality, people are less caring of one another, there is less mutuality in relationships, people have to fend for themselves and get what they can … Mistrust and inequality reinforce each other. (p. 16)

By opening opportunity for much larger numbers, comprehensive reform removed the role of grammar schools in the local distribution of status and respect, and so disrupted established modes of social differentiation. This left fledgling comprehensives to struggle in a changing economic environment that was marked by growing inequality, intensified competition between social groups, and diminishing trust. The egalitarian neighbourhood school, with its promise of inclusion rather than privilege, became vulnerable as neo-liberal, individualist narratives became increasingly dominant in the 1980s and beyond.

Comprehensives represented, and tended to emphasise, mutuality, cooperation and personal growth at a time when politicians were eager to push competition, choice and skills. However diverse and successful they became, all-ability schools did not fit the dominant ideology that emerged from the economic crisis of the mid 1970s. After 1989, legislation reconstructed education to accommodate neo-liberal preferences, with schools and students obliged to compete for resources, status and examination success. In this new game, schools and colleges with favourable or selective intakes produced better results, and were rated highly because the system was designed to reward attainment, not progress, and was blind to the impact of disadvantage.

Performance tables based on shifting criteria increased the tension between merit and worth that has always compromised the comprehensive project. School qualifications have no value if everyone passes; but how should the achievements of average and below average students be recognised when they have no hope of a good grade? Policy makers tend to elide the difficulty

by setting ever more demanding targets for individual schools. They insist that the status of a valued qualification is accessible for every child, if only schools and teachers do their job properly. But there is no escaping the normal distribution curve, and no alchemy that preserves the value of gold when everyone has enough.

Comprehensive reform was not, therefore, a rational and progressive quest for organisational improvement, but another episode in a continuous ideological struggle for the soul of mass education in the United Kingdom. Policy aimed to accommodate local pressures for more inclusive patterns of schooling, but new arrangements appeared to threaten vested interests, prompting an equal and opposite reaction. Conservative campaigners, like the authors of the celebrated Black Papers, mobilised the standards agenda, claiming that traditional values had been sacrificed and that 'more means worse'. Neo-liberal ideologues began to press for more radical solutions, including the introduction of competitive markets, vouchers and open enrolment.

The era of comprehensive reorganisation does not, therefore, provide us with convenient models for the future, or with a lost ideal that may be recovered by wishful thinking or an act of will. Instead, we should recognise that policy evolved through turbulent years when competing schools of thought contended with unusual bitterness, and when new schemes and practices reflected the extent to which the supposed needs of global business were permitted, even encouraged, to override democratic rights and children's personal growth. As the furore over university fees and the educational maintenance allowance confirms, this history is a warning that social justice is a battle cry, not a permanent achievement, and that the struggle for democratic education has to be fought over and over again.

References

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