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Secondary Modern School Education: an essay in subjugation and repression

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ABSTRACT This article reflects on the inequity of secondary modern school education. In doing so it draws heavily on the experience of the author while highlighting inputs from others who failed the 11+ examination and were banished to such schools. The article argues that selection undermines the self-esteem of secondary modern school pupils and places them at a life-long disadvantage relative to successful candidates of selection. He discusses some of his experiences in greater detail in his 2002 autobiography *Foreday Morning*.

> *I think the fail did leave a deep scar and I think that it's still there to some extent.*
> (Alastair Campbell, former Press Secretary to Tony Blair, on John Prescott's failure to pass the 11-plus examination, on Pier's Morgan's ITV programme, *Life Stories*, ITV Programme, 19 May 2011)

I am often struck by the propensity of many with a grammar school education to let slip the fact that they passed the 11-plus examination and enjoyed the benefits of being at such a school. This happens in day-to-day interactions with colleagues, casual acquaintances and even perfect strangers. Often, too, where celebrity politicians and others are concerned, I have witnessed how many who have been to grammar school find a way of inserting that detail into the conversation. Conversely, it is rare indeed for secondary modern school graduates to gratuitously share this titbit of information in casual conversations. There is a taint attached to secondary modern school education; a stigma which, as Campbell asserts above, stays with you for life.

This article reflects largely on my experience of secondary modern school education in late fifties/early sixties Oxford. It is an experience tinctured at times by racism but the bulk of what is related was shared by the whole school pupil population, which was, apart from me, universally white. This article is

not intended to be a mere personal account of secondary modern school education; it draws on the experiences of several who failed the 11-plus examination and were subjected to schooling in the secondary modern school system. In the process I hope to demonstrate that secondary school education, when filtered through the system of selection, can damage the quality of life of those who fail the 11-plus and are sent to secondary modern schools.

According to Clyde Chitty in *Eugenics, 'Race' and Intelligence in Education* (2007) the 1902 Education Act 'established a clear and rigid distinction between elementary and secondary education (p. 19). Elementary schools were established after the Forster Education Act of 1870 which was '… a truly radical measure in that it laid the foundations of a universal system of elementary education for the working class (p. 16).' Chitty continues,

> From now on there was to be no confusion: two systems, each with a distinct educational and social function, were to run parallel to each other … the vast majority of children were to be educated in elementary schools where they would remain until they reached the statutory school-leaving age (p. 19)

The 1944 Educational Act by contrast, 'sought to extend educational opportunity by introducing the principle of 'free secondary education for all' (p. 20). What, however, emerged was a very divided form of education in the secondary phase, an education system,

> … based on the widely held belief that it was possible to say, from the results of tests administered at the age of 11, what a child's future accomplishments would be. Those who 'passed' the new eleven-plus selection examination, roughly one in five of all children in 1950, could gain access to grammar schools; while, for the majority of those pupils who 'failed', the only school on offer was one of the new secondary moderns, dismissed by many as merely the old elementary schools writ large. And it is clear that patronising attitudes towards the sort of education thought 'appropriate' for working-class youngsters persisted in the type of curriculum provided for most of the children attending these new secondary modern schools (p. 20)

Max Morris, in 'The Route to My Comprehensive' (2004) in addressing the establishment of the 1944 Education Act and the emergence of Secondary Modern schools states that,

> The Act provided secondary education according to 'Age, Aptitude and Ability'. Such innocent and common-sense sounding words! But they became the foundation of a postwar secondary system every bit as divided and class-biased as in the bad pre-war days. It was put over by the con trick of renaming the old 'senior schools' as 'Modern Schools'. Whoever thought up that title deserves the accolade due to genius (p. 42).

My experience of secondary education started in 1957 as an 11-year-old Barbadian immigrant to the UK. I had not taken the 11-plus examination, which in normal circumstances would have taken place at primary school.[1] Instead my parents found a place for me at the local secondary modern school. There I was faced with one of the foulest, most soul-destroying experiences of my life.

The curriculum at Cowley St John Boys' school, certainly for pupils in my band, was intended to prepare us for the most basic responsibility in society. There were only 12 staff and a school roll of less than 280. The three Rs, RE, PE, art, history, geography, music, metalwork, woodwork and general science constituted the curriculum. We did arithmetic as opposed to mathematics, and didn't learn trigonometry or algebra. Instead our curriculum consisted of long division, addition and subtraction. Similarly, our science education was rudimentary. We did general science. On leaving school I knew little about chemistry, physics and biology – I did not even know they were separate disciplines. Music education was a mere sing along with the head teacher to pieces like *Nymphs and Shepherds* as he tinkled on the piano and led by example in his throaty tenor. Often we listened to gramophone recordings of music by Purcell, Haydn, Handel and other classical composers which, given the circumstances, we all hated. We did not do English literature, either classical or contemporary; nor was there a foreign language on the curriculum. Attending a school that didn't set homework was also a huge disappointment. Of course there was no school library and we were not encouraged to join a public library. Year groups were divided into two forms, A and B. Pupils in the top group consisted largely of more able students, some of whom may have failed the 11-plus by the slimmest margin, while most in the B form were a potpourri of slow learners in need of remedial support, a few who couldn't be bothered to stretch themselves academically, and a number of misfits who simply wanted to be anywhere other than in the school system. Many of these posed real challenges for the staff. I was placed in the lower stream. Though just 11 years of age, I quickly became aware that the quality of teaching and learning in the school, were substandard. The curriculum, teacher expectations and quality of teaching were simply awful.

Though accepted by the pupils, many teachers at the school from the head teacher down were put out by my presence there. My first humiliation was at the hands of Mr C., the head teacher. In my first week at Cowley St John, he walked into the classroom. All pupils immediately stood, as we were required to do. Mr C., a rotund man with nicotine-stained teeth, walked to my form teacher Mrs Harris's lectern and asked the class to sit. He then instructed me to come to the front of the class, where he proceeded to test my knowledge of basic arithmetic. Not meeting my eye for an instant, he questioned me:

What is two and two?
Four sir.
What is four and four?
Eight sir

What is eight and eight
Sixteen sir.
Right go back to your place.

With that he then took to his heels and strode out of the room. I remained in the B stream till the end of my school career.

Chris Searle (2001), in *An Exclusive Education*, notes the sense of despair apparent in some secondary modern school pupils and the obvious excitement shared by those who had passed the eleven plus. He states that:

> A school-leaver from Manchester supplied a poem which passionately expressed the feelings of one of the majority who failed the eleven-plus and was sent to a lower-tier secondary modern school – the 'catch all' of those who were excluded from the 'grammar school' strata. This was the first verse:
>
> I am one of those Secondary Moderners,
> The ones that the future holds nothing in store for.
> Don't anyone tell me I have a future,
> Because I am one of a million fleas
> Trapped in a land of giant bees.
> When I left school my heart was set on writing.
> When I left school, I didn't know that all my life I'd be fighting.
> Something called a working man's ditch,
> Where the poor get poorer and the rich get richer.
> Already my bones begin to ache,
> And my mind is drugged to hell with all the trash of life, my life.
> Already at seventeen my soul begins to stretch and awake
> And I wish with all my brain
> I could go back to sleep again.
> (Peter Gresty)

This poem by Peter Gresty is contrasted with that of an 11-year-old, Wayne Graham, on his way to grammar school. His poem reads:

> I am going to the Grammar School
> Oh! My first day.
> You get a lot of homework there
> To last you the whole day.
> Playing football
> This will be fun.
> They say there's a gymnasium there
> But I don't care.
> I've come to work
> To get O-levels,
> Working all the time,
> We'll start half an hour before nine …

(Wayne Graham)

Peter Gresty expresses a feeling of hopelessness, degradation and disappointment at being a secondary 'moderner', whereas Wayne Graham exults in the excitement of being at grammar school, that he will be doing homework and getting an education; after all, 'I've come to work to get O-levels'.

My brother-in-law, Dr Norman Godman, who went to a secondary modern school in Hull, was a distinguished and respected Labour MP of 21 years' standing for Greenock and Port Glasgow. Before that he was a lecturer at Heriot Watt University in Scotland. Dr Godman studied for a degree at Hull University where Lord Prescott was a friend and contemporary. In a recent telephone conversation during which I told him I was writing this article, he volunteered the following outline of his experiences as a pupil at a secondary modern school in Hull:

> In 1948, at the age of 11, having completed my primary schooling and failing my '11-plus', I was sent to the Westbourne Street Boys' School, on Hessle Road in Hull. There was an adjacent girls' school. This school was, I think, known as a county primary school and, as such, a precursor to the secondary modern school. All of my fellow-pupils were the sons of manual working-class parents. Not a single boy could be said to have parents who could be said to be professional or middle class.
>
> Most of us were the sons of men and women employed in the local fishing industry, e.g. fishermen, or trawler men, fish-filleters, bobbers or fish-house lasses and the like. A very small minority of the lads had fathers who were shipwrights, platers, welders and other trawler-maintenance workers. They, however, were very few in number since most tradesmen and their families lived in council houses away from Hessle Road.
>
> The education we received in this school, built in the late 1880s, was, to put it mildly, sparse or rudimentary. No language training, no music lessons or history. Despite the best efforts of a small number of teachers, our 'education' made it plain to us that we were being prepared for a lifetime of manual labour. Incidentally, discipline was maintained by the liberal use of the cane. I myself received 'six of the best' (three on each hand) for smoking a cigarette in the lavatory. Many of us were destined for the fishing industry, which at that time, employed over 20,000 people.
>
> The best any intelligent lad could hope for was an apprenticeship to a skilled trade. It's fair to say that the English class system bore down heavily on the men, women and children of Hessle Road. In this we were no different from those living in mining, steel and shipbuilding communities.
>
> I was told that my headmaster, a socialist, had visited my parents in order to persuade them to instruct me to sit another exam at the age

> of 12. This was aimed not at placing successful candidates in grammar schools but in technical colleges; a kind of halfway house between secondary modern school and grammar schools. I declined to sit the exam.
> So, pupils like myself who had failed the '11-plus' exam or those who were not encouraged to sit this selection test accepted that we were very much part of our working-class community.
> On Hessle Road in the middle of the twentieth century, the class-based educational system sent bright young lads onto the trawlers, or other manual occupations, instead of developing the talents that many possessed.
> In the street where I lived, of over 250 children, fewer than a dozen went to grammar schools, having successfully navigated the '11-plus'. The overwhelming majority spent their entire working lives in manual occupations.

My substandard curriculum has an echo in the awful fare to which Norman was exposed. Teachers' dislike of pupils and prediction that we will all end up at in dead-end-jobs is repeated in the dire expectations that his teachers had of him and his fellow pupils. The liberal use of the cane and other forms of corporal punishment was a feature of my education at Cowley St John that left me quivering with fear each day as I took the walk to school. I recall an incident that encapsulates much of the harsh brutality of my time there.

One afternoon in my second week at the school, Mrs Harris, instructed us to take pens, rulers and pencils from our desks in preparation for a history lesson. I instantly complied with her request. As I lifted my desk lid to collect materials, the wooden ruler slipped from my hand and fell in a clatter to the parquet flooring; it was a moment of dreadful anticipation.

I glanced over the rim of my desk lid at Mrs Harris but she was already in motion. Within moments she was upon me. The half-crazed woman slapped my head, punched my shoulders and chest; kicked my bare shins. It was an outpouring of rage the likes of which I had not experienced before, a fury at my presence in her classroom terminating in this symbolic act of annihilation. Yet my Barbadian upbringing, ingrained respect for teachers and awe of whites forbade any retaliatory or even evasive action. Fearful of how my dad would react if he got to know of the incident, I never told spoke to him or my mother about it.[2]

I regularly found myself walking with children who attended Cheney Technical School. All the children had satchels, in which they carried their homework and books.

As a child brought up in Barbados for the first 11 years of my life, where good-quality education is a national obsession [3], I was a highly motivated student. From before I knew myself my parents had singled me out for academic success, determining that I would be a high achiever. Their ambitions for me became a personal obsession. Though lacking access to appropriate books at

home, I read what I could and worked hard at my studies. On migration to the UK the change of context had not undermined my self-belief or desire to be successful. Importantly, too, having had a good primary education in Barbados, I was quite discriminating in respect of my expectations of schools, particularly in the UK, the 'Mother country'. Cowley St John Secondary Modern Boys' was therefore a shock beyond my wildest imaginings.

Each day I took the same route to and from school as children who attended Cheney Technical School off the Cowley Road. They always carried satchels fat with books and homework; whereas I wasn't given even a stick of homework in the four years I was at Cowley St John School. I wanted the opportunities they had and was eager to prepare myself for a professional career in later life. I wanted to learn mathematics and science as they did. In truth I wanted to wear a neat uniform like the Cheney Technical School pupils did and be admired for being a schoolboy success. Without any hope of homework there was no need for a satchel. Instead each day I took the one kilometre walk to and from school with empty hands buried deep empty pockets and with no learning material on my back. I knew I was being marked out for manual work and a life of drudgery and even poverty. The complexities of relationship within the family, more especially my relationship with both my parents, made it impossible for me to broach my frustrations with them. My mother was a wonderfully gentle and caring woman but lacked confidence in anything academic; my father, on the other hand,was severe and tied up in his own lifestyle. In a state of desperation I tried to do something about the widening gap in my life opportunities and those of my peers.

My Determination

In my second year at Cowley St John School my father bought from a travelling salesman a set of five encyclopaedias which dealt with 10 disciplines in each; 50 in total. Among the 50 topics covered were Latin and various modern foreign languages such as French, German, Russian, Greek, Spanish. There was also a section on music, one on shorthand and another on mathematics. I regularly flicked through these books and took an interest in the sections on foreign languages. Latin, a dead language, seemed pointless. French was spoken differently from the way it was written. Eventually I tried to teach myself Spanish. I knew I would need support with the section on mathematics and hadn't a hope of getting that so gave up on it. I read the material on Spanish and a bit on philosophy. Ethnography was of enormous interest. Here for the first time in my life I encountered terms such as polygamy and polyandry. They remain with me to this day. I had started the process of self-education.

I started teaching myself music on a second-hand honky-tonk piano my father bought. I listened to the blues and picked out tunes that way. Eventually I taught myself to play tolerably well by ear. In later years I was to go on to play with several bands in Oxford and later in London, over time playing with *Protoplasm* Upstairs at Ronnie Scotts Jazz Club. In the meantime I could play

cricket well, did well in the school team and ended up playing for Oxfordshire Schoolboys against boys from grammar and even private schools. Little were they to know how very aware I was of them and their privilege – the burning desire I had to be exposed to what they experiencing each day at school.

Meanwhile I was developing a reputation as a painter at school. Unfortunately, I was informed that I couldn't attend courses at the school of art till the age of 16. As a consequence I was given the choice of either going out to work for a year or attending the College of Further Education until the age of 16 when I could then apply for a place at the school of art. Naturally I opted for attending the college of further education because I was desperate to learn.

I went to the college of further education and sat on the arts-based GCE courses. I worked very hard at them though it was not intended that I should take any GCEs. At the age of 16 I applied to the art college again and was informed that a new course called the Diploma in Art and Design had started and that I needed five GCEs or the equivalent to get on it. I went back to the college of further education and started studying with even greater determination and obtained the necessary qualifications to get on the foundation course at the polytechnic. At the age of 18 I attended the school of art.

Conclusion

Alastair Campbell makes reference to John Prescott's deep scar which resulted from him failing the 11-plus examination. I often wonder if part of that deep scarring is reflected in Prescott's rapid speech and manic desire to demonstrate articulacy and command of language. We do indeed carry our scars forever. I left school without confidence in my ability to make an impact on life. As with many who have not had a decent school-based education, it can affect your articulacy, your confidence in forming sentences, and ability to think in a sequential and calm way. Those with greater self-confidence come across as clear and more coherent in their thinking. This is a boon in the world of social interaction and the world of work. As a person who had a substandard education, one in which pupils were despised by the staff, you have had to learn those skills by yourself and without the aid and experience of teachers. It is little surprise then that few achieve that. It is not that they lack the ability of course, but it is a terrible pressure on the student who has constantly to self-educate and self-interrogate. It requires tremendous discipline and the ability to stand outside yourself to critique what you are doing. Achieving even limited success by this method of self-education is in many respects an impossible task. It is little surprise that many fall by the wayside. It is not surprising that many fall by the wayside or can aspire only to become panel-beaters, line workers, filleters or fish-house workers.

Notes

[1] Though stigmatised and damaged by my experience of secondary modern schooling, I am relieved at not being branded a failure by failing the 11-plus examination. The likelihood is that had I taken it I would have failed the examination as my education in Barbados had not prepared me for such testing.

[2] My parents came to the UK in 1955 and soon found employment at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford, my father as a porter and my mother a chamber maid. One day a Polish worker racially abused my mother. When my father heard of the incident he chased the man all over the hotel with a knife, threatening to kill him. I was mindful of my father's hot temper and resolved to keep my experience of abuse to myself for fear of how he was likely to react.

[3] Barbados, with a literacy rate of more than 97%, has always placed a high premium on education.

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