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Grammar Schools: brief flowering of social mobility?

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ABSTRACT Grammar schools are increasingly remembered, especially by right-wing ideologues, as the agents of a 'brief flowering' of post-war social mobility. This article presents statistical, documentary and interview evidence of secondary education in the eleven plus era, and finds nothing to justify the claim that selective schools produced a general improvement in educational opportunity or social mobility. Detailed life history interviews with Don (b. 1941, secondary modern, then secondary technical) and Margaret (b. 1951, grammar) recreate the almost forgotten 1950s world where opportunity was rationed and bright children were complacently failed. Access to post-16 and university education became widely available only when governments adopted a very much more generous funding regime, and comprehensive schools removed the complex barriers to success created by selection. Nostalgic accounts of grammar schools are a classic case of recovered false memory syndrome.

Introduction

Nostalgia about grammar schools has become increasingly fashionable. Right of centre commentators in pub bars and the media regularly assert that 50 years ago grammar schools were an engine of social mobility, wantonly destroyed by progressive teachers and vindictive Labour politicians. *The Telegraph*'s Iain Martin (2012), for example, argues that:

> If we do want to recapture that extraordinary, brief, post-war flowering of social mobility – when the grammar-school boys and girls emerged to scale the heights of the professions, academia, the civil service, business and the media – greater selection in schools is going to have to be one of the weapons in our armoury.

Peter Mullen in *The Northern Echo* (2012) is more direct, demanding that we 'bring back grammar schools'. Abolishing them 'was a mistake. And it was cruel. It took away from bright but poor children their best chance of

improving their life chances.' BBC4's (2012) two-part programme, *The Grammar School: a secret history*, promotes a similar but romantic perspective:

> The British grammar schools provided five consecutive prime ministers as well as many high fliers in industry, science and the arts. Yet at the height of their success they were phased out … this two-part series uses personal stories and rare archive (*sic*) to reveal the secret history of some of Britain's most successful schools, whose aim was to give the very best education to talented children – whatever their background.

These strident advocates of selection do not acknowledge that opportunity has increased dramatically since the partial demise of their beloved grammar schools. There were ten times more undergraduates in 2004 than in 1962, for example, and twenty times more than in 1939 (The Cabinet Papers, 1915–1981; Dyhouse, 2007). During the supposed golden age of the grammar school, few children entered a sixth form, while higher education provided places for less than one-twentieth of each age group (Robbins Report, 1963). Talented children are much more likely to participate in higher education today than fifty years ago.

Selective schools may not have been responsible for the limited places available in higher education but they certainly contributed to a 'colossal waste of talent in working-class children' (Jackson & Marsden, 1986, p. 16). Pupils from working-class backgrounds were less likely to be selected for grammar schools, less likely to do well in public examinations, and much less likely to progress to higher education. They were also vulnerable to another source of unfairness, produced by variations in the provision of selective places, from 64 per cent in Merionethshire to 8 per cent at Gateshead (Simon, 1991).

Class bias, rather than a tendency to increase opportunity, was the outstanding characteristic of the 11+ régime in the 1950s, as official reports confirmed at the time. Seventy-five per cent of middle-class entrants to National Service had some form of selective education, mainly in grammar schools, while 85 per cent of working-class recruits had attended secondary moderns (Crowther Report, 1959). At the height of Iain Martin's 'flowering of social mobility', when grammar schools are supposed to have given 'the very best education to talented children – whatever their background' (BBC4, 2012), *The Early Leaving Report* (Ministry of Education, 1954) pointed out that children from semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds obtained only half as many grammar school places as might be expected from their proportion of the general population.

Although there is convincing evidence that increased educational opportunity has coincided with the comprehensive rather than the selective era, the improvement is more readily appreciated by the generation that grew up through and after the Second World War than by their children and grandchildren. Up to 90 per cent of pre-war babies and baby boomers [1] were born into households with no experience of secondary or higher education.

Their parents were denied all but an elementary education (Vincent, 1997). About 80 per cent of baby boomers failed the eleven plus examination (11+) and were excluded from grammar schools and post-16 education (Simon, 1991). Less than 5 per cent entered university (Robbins Report, 1963). This generation felt the formative impact of selection on their lives but their raw encounters with failure and exclusion have become a folk memory rather than a powerful influence on public debate. Most of those educated after 1980 have little practical knowledge of the 11+ to set against the attractive images and anecdotes of television programmes like *The Grammar School: a secret history* (BBC4, 2012).

Half a century ago, evidence that grammar schools were letting down successive generations of talented working-class children was important in persuading policy-makers to promote more inclusive forms of schooling (Jackson & Marsden, 1986). Today, with the experience of selection neglected or forgotten, journalistic ideologues seem free to reinvent the past to accommodate a widespread nostalgia for Latin, blazers and exclusive education. They invite us to a lazy, hazy dream of lost but hallowed grammar schools, steeped in traditional English values that require nice children to learn Dryden and Pope but also to ignore the messy reality of the modern world.

Dreams and nostalgia seem a poor foundation for policy, however. We shall not close the chasm between the diverging destinies of rich and poor without better understanding the turbulent education history of the second half of the twentieth century. We need to enquire more closely and ground our recommendations more firmly than is currently the fashion. This paper therefore aims to present and examine a rather different 'secret history' from that documented by BBC4. Detailed life history interviews with Don and Margaret, born respectively in 1941 and 1951, aim to recover lost evidence of the many problems that eventually undermined the selective system. There is an urgent need to rescue a generation that has grown up innocent of the terrors of the 11+ from the manufactured romance now surrounding social exclusion in the period before and after the Second World War.

Margaret provided the initial stimulus for this study by sending me recollections of her co-educational Midlands grammar school in the early 1960s:

> In the spirit of assisting you in arguing the case against selection and hopefully not to bore you with my personal anecdotes – I have records of Advanced and Ordinary level results, some by subject, from 1962–66. They make damning reading even to me! … My year's A level results show that of the 1st Year intake of 56, 11 gained 29 A-level passes. (Margaret, 2012)

The grammar school outcomes documented in the early 1960s by Jackson & Marsden (1986) and by Margaret (2012) in her email seem at best inconsistent with the claims made by Martin (2012) and Mullen (2012). The aim of this micro-history is therefore to consider the extent to which the negative

consequences of the selective regime, as it operated in the 1950s and 1960s, undermine the assertion that grammar schools were responsible for a great 'flowering' of social mobility.

Methods

Margaret, born in 1951, readily agreed to my suggestion of a life history interview that would explore her origins, upbringing, school and college education, and subsequent social mobility. Her partner Don, born in 1941, also volunteered to contribute an interview that would help me capture and describe the price of the selective system for those who experienced it at first hand. He failed the 11+ and has long questioned the idea that grammar schools opened pathways to success for large numbers of working-class children.

The interviews were voice recorded on 20 May 2012 at the respondents' home, with Don and Margaret co-constructing their individual stories with me through separate informal, semi-structured conversations, each lasting approximately 80 minutes (Ellis, 1998). I typed a contemporary note of both interviews, yielding 4,888 words of data in the form of first person narratives. The respondents checked and amended my edited version of their interviews. My approach was guided by the case study method recommended by qualitative social mobility researchers (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997), and by Thompson's (1997) use of life history interviews. I also draw on other sources as appropriate, including guidance for parents on secondary selection issued by the East Midlands Education Authority (1961). Names have been anonymised.

This very small-scale case study or micro-history offers an illuminative, rich description of the life and education of two individuals with contrasting but essentially similar experiences. Margaret, based in a rural area in the Midlands, passed the 11+ but later found that her B stream placement restricted her curriculum and future options. Don, brought up in a London borough, failed the 11+ and was propelled into a technical, vocational route that he perceived as unsuitable and limiting. Their stories suggest the variety of ways in which educational structures constrained rather than enhanced opportunities for social mobility. The extended perspective of their autobiographical narratives enables their origins and the pattern of their family lives and circumstances to emerge as at least as significant as their schools in shaping their futures.

Their individual stories describe an experience of growing up in the shadow of the 11+ examination that was commonplace at the time. Those who failed often told friends about the damage inflicted on their self-esteem and future prospects. Working-class children who passed but later struggled to adapt to the middle-class demands of grammar schools have also repeated their stories of shame and embarrassment, of the price paid for their success (Hoskins, 2012). These tales of failure and regret are fading from the popular memory, however, so that views of the selective era are too easily coloured by journalists and broadcasters like Andrew Neil, who present grammar schools as agents of

widespread social mobility, rather than as a narrow conduit exploited by a small number of exceptional working-class pioneers (Moore, 2011).

Although Margaret and Don's testimony is representative of a common experience and illustrates the reality of the 11+ for most families and children, it is no less anecdotal than that of the witnesses who appeared in *The Grammar School: a secret history* (BBC4, 2012). No individual story or pair of stories can hope to encapsulate the essence of the 11+ régime, or the consequences of its partial dissolution (grammar schools survive in Kent, Lincolnshire and elsewhere) because comprehensive reorganization was a slow process that unfolded over a period of at least 20 years, producing a patchwork diversity of schools and systems (Benn & Simon, 1970, Kerckhoff et al, 1996).

This case study can illuminate only a few dark patches in the selective picture, in the hope of providing grounded if partial evidence of its operation and consequences over time, as a foundation for future comparison and generalization. Margaret and Don's life histories are consistent with contemporary analysis of the selective system, however, and include persuasive evidence that grammar schools did not serve the best interests of the whole population (Jackson & Marsden, 1986). The immense increase in participation in secondary and higher education in England and Wales that followed the abolition of most grammar schools also suggests that Margaret and Don are reasonably representative of an earlier generation, for whom selection was a barrier to progress rather than an engine of advance.

Life Histories: Margaret and Don

Margaret

My mother, born in 1916, was an only child from a very lowly background in a large industrial city, but her father eventually rose the ladder from office boy to company secretary, enabling the family to live in a nice home, to rent a weekend cottage in the country and to drive a car. Her parents placed no value on education and discouraged her from applying to art college, which they saw as a route to moral ruin. So she left elementary school at 14, attended secretarial college and became an accounts clerk.

My father came from a large family in Canada where all the boys worked on the farm. His sisters became nurses or teachers and he had a brief spell at college studying engineering. He joined the Canadian army on the outbreak of war and came to England, where he met and married my mother in 1941. My brother was born in 1943. In the late 1940s they set up home in a rural village in the Midlands, near to the weekend cottage my grandparents had rented as an escape from the city. My father was a manual worker on a farm and in factories. Although he had no ambition whatever, he was prepared to work seven days a week. Money was very tight but despite that we had middle-class aspirations, we always had a car, for example, and mother had an eye for nice things, bargains, antiques etc. and we always used serviettes. She built up a nice home with very little and taught us to think we were better than other people. When I

was eleven I began to think it was a strange idea to think you were better than other people.

My brother was seven years older than me. He went to the village school, failed the 11+ and went to a secondary modern in the nearby small town. He didn't get the school-leaving certificate. I followed him in 1956, aged 5 and immediately loved it. On the first Saturday I cried because I couldn't go, nobody had told me it was open only five days a week. I remember there were just two all-age classes for all the children. I was one of about 4 in my year group and I was the only girl. There were no girls in the year group below either.

I learned to read quickly and can't remember not being able to read illustrated books. I liked sums, especially repetitive sums and had a real sense of achievement from doing pages and pages all the same. I had only two teachers, Mrs Clark and Mrs Read. Going into Mrs Read's class was a big event.

The 11+ was also a big event in Mrs Read's life and ours. Any child who showed promise was prepared for the 11+ which meant being given practice intelligence tests cut out of the *Times Educational Supplement*. I remember spotting that they depended on codes and had it on the kitchen wall to help me answer the questions. On the day of the examination the school was closed. Our teacher went to the next village and we had someone we'd never met before to supervise our examination. As we lived near the school I was sent a couple of minutes before the exam because my parents didn't know the protocol of arriving very early. When I arrived I was the last and was told off for being late, which upset me a great deal. When it came to break time between the exams I was sent into the girls' playground on my own for the fifteen minute break. There was an intelligence test as well as a story to write and maths and comprehension but I don't remember much about it.

When the results came through I was allowed home to tell mummy and Mrs Read came to see us and was so delighted I'd passed that she tipped out the contents of her purse and gave it to me. She was rather a theatrical lady. My parents were pleased, everyone was, and there was the ceremony of buying the uniform and practicing putting on gym slips. The grammar school was in a small nearby town about five miles from home. I was the only one to get through, one of the boys was borderline and he had an interview, but he failed that and went to the secondary modern, also in the town. He went on to get five General Certificate of Education (GCE) ordinary level passes.

My parents had the idea that girls should not have such a good education and said my brother should have had the grammar school place and I should have had the secondary modern place. I don't know what they wanted for me really, when I passed the 11+ they said I'd become an Oxford don. I transferred to the grammar school in 1962.

I didn't expect the grammar school to open my horizons so I wasn't disappointed. I found it very difficult going and knowing only one or two girls by sight. I didn't know anyone else, I was shy, not sporty, and I remember feeling at a terrific disadvantage compared with the girls from town who had

lots of friends. They also knew the rules of netball, a new game for me. I remember changing for sports and was asked what position. I said milk monitor when they meant left half or whatever. I was not aware of social class issues, on the contrary, I remember visiting friends and being secretly shocked at the conditions they lived in.

I was comfortable intellectually and socially. The only time I wasn't comfortable was in the run up to GCE ordinary level when fear of failure drove me to work like a little Trojan. I was driven by the fear of failure, not the desire to succeed. I remember returning in the fifth year after the Whitsun holiday and being the only girl in 5B who didn't have a wonderful suntan. I'd been inside revising while they'd been outdoors having fun.

I accepted everything perfectly at the time and it is only in retrospect that I realize my choices were very, very limited. Luckily, I enjoyed practical subjects. We were in mixed ability forms in the first form, and streamed from the second form. I was put in the B form and choices, particularly for the girls, were restricted. I always felt there was a higher proportion of town girls in the A than the B form but have no tangible evidence of that. Town people seemed to gravitate upwards. I was good at mathematics, however. We used to have tests every half term and we had to sit in order of our results and I was always 1, 2, or 3. In the first two rows there were only a couple of girls, all the rest were boys. I got a form prize in 2B for coming 2nd. Although I didn't get a prize after that I think I was in the top five.

There was a massive number of people in the A form who ended up with only two or three ordinary levels, so I think there was a big overlap between A and B and some should have been shifted down. But I don't remember anyone moving up or down.

At the beginning of the second year the A form started Latin and a bit later, Spanish. The second set did only French. The A form also did English language at the end of the fourth form to allow them to do English literature at the end of the fifth form. B form girls didn't do proper science – the boys did chemistry and physics. Despite all this, I was amongst the high fliers, with 7 ordinary level passes, including English language, mathematics, history, geography, human biology, cookery and needlework. I do regret that I didn't do English literature. I read a book today and see it as a story and find it hard to interpret it as anything but a story.

At ordinary level I didn't have any real plans, except that teaching was in my head and perhaps being a librarian because I was shy. I'm not into books but thought it was the sort of job a quiet grammar school girl might do. I knew I had higher aspirations than being a supervisor in British Home Stores, an option suggested by a careers adviser. My parents liked the idea of teaching and after ordinary levels I did research my options. I decided I'd like to become a dietician or institutional manager (concerned with hospitality etc.) or teacher but my parents told me that teaching was more suitable. University was never mentioned at any point. I can't remember the feeling of anyone taking me under his or her wing and championing me. I was quiet and sullen if challenged.

My advanced level options were very limited. Mathematics was ruled out because I hadn't done trigonometry through being in the B form; English was ruled out because I hadn't done English literature; science was ruled out because there was no progression from human biology. The only thing I could have done was geography, but the teacher was notorious for falling asleep in the afternoons, so I voted for the history teacher, though he had to go out for a fag mid-lesson. I remember someone in the village asking if I was going to university when the results came through. I answered: 'I'm not clever enough to go to university' and probably still think that. In the end I had a B in needlework, a D in cookery and an ordinary level pass in history. Of the original 56 people in the A and B forms, only 11 survived to secure advanced level success, with a 29 passes between them. But in a way I was happy with the advanced levels I did because they were a relatively easy and pleasant option. I never put myself to the test by doing the more rigorous academic subjects.

After advanced level, my first choice was to study for a certificate in education at a training college where I could do both food and textiles equally.

On balance I don't wish my life had been different. I think I was shunted into teaching. I was not the happy, bouncy person that children love, I've never been a popular sort of teacher, and as the years have gone by I've been aware of it more. My role models for teaching were the teachers I had, and with hindsight, they were not the best role models. I sometimes wonder if things would have been different if there had been other options.

Don

I was born in a north London borough in 1941. My parents were humble and had no great aspirations. My dad was an engineer and wanted me to be a draughtsman, which he saw as better than working on the shop floor. Dad left school at 12. He had a shocking education and struggled to write but he was a thinker who loved opera and read the *Manchester Guardian* and the *News Chronicle.*

There were two or three forms in my large primary school. I was not in the top set and struggled with reading and English. I've always joked that I was almost 11 before I could read with confidence.

Only three or four children went from my primary school to the grammar school, so in 1952 I found myself in the top set in a nearby London secondary modern. Because so many of us were going to the same school and were placed in the top set we were not downcast. Once I got to the school I had no awareness of future life opportunities and the impact of not going to grammar school. If my parents were disappointed they disguised it from me.

I went to a purposeful secondary modern in 1952 and worked hard. There was lots of homework but foreign languages were not offered. I did well and floated to the top of the group, winning prizes in mathematics, physics, chemistry and geography. I began to flourish and picked up 7 prizes in all. But

I was there only two years because my parents decided to relocate to be near my grandmother after my grandfather's death. I was not keen to move because I was happy but had no choice really. So I had to take the 13+ to get into the secondary technical college near my new home.[2] As I was showing promise by this time my father's aspirations were for me to become a design engineer or a draughtsman. But I wasn't keen because I didn't like the machines, in fact, was rather scared of using them.

I wish I'd been good at English. I remember talking to my mates about starting a pamphlet to tell the truth about politics, I wanted to publish something but was useless at English. I also wanted to write a play called *Jam for Tea* about a respectable family. I thought with jam you were well off, I wanted a commentary on what people did and didn't have. But my mates weren't interested and I hadn't the ability to do anything about it, the ideas just remained thoughts in my head. I lived then in a London suburb intended for the upper working class and we were comfortable and warm, there was no obvious poverty. There were no slums round the corner, nothing like the slums in documentaries about the 1950s and the East End. So I don't know what triggered my armchair, left-wing leaning outlook. My Dad said I was a rebel without a cause.[3]

I was at the technical college from 1955 to 1960 and was perhaps happy. There were no girls. I got on well but was unsure about the heavily technical nature of the curriculum, which included mathematics, physics, chemistry and mechanics. Eventually I obtained ordinary level passes in mathematics, mechanics, physics, chemistry, metalwork, technical drawing and English. I crept through this with 47 per cent. The English paper was one long essay followed by comprehension and a short essay on a technical topic, for example, explaining how you would prepare and stain a floor or repair a cycle puncture. We took a special English paper with a technical bias rather than the usual clause analysis and précis. In the first year at the technical college we had lessons in history but it was made clear we couldn't take the examination. I missed not doing history because I'd had prizes for that in my secondary modern.

My family's aspirations then were still down the line of being a draughtsman. I was good at technical drawing but didn't know what I was drawing, I didn't know the machine parts, they meant nothing to me. I'm not mechanically minded; I was scared of the machinery. I didn't like working in the metalwork shops and wasn't good with my hands. I could draw but didn't have a feel for what I was drawing. I was on tramlines, I didn't resent it but it didn't occur to me that I should be thinking of other possibilities.

In the year before ordinary levels the college was campaigning to run a sixth form that the local authority objected to and my father became one of the parents on the action group. They won the case and a sixth form was created a year ahead of me. The basis was that classes would be shared between the secondary technical college and the further education (FE) college. My father joined the campaign because I was showing so much promise. But the only

courses on offer were mathematics, applied mathematics, physics, chemistry and engineering drawing. Nothing else. In the lower sixth when I joined there were just six of us. Existing staff from the secondary technical college taught the mathematics but the sciences were based in the FE college.

While in the sixth I was more actively thinking, I don't want to go into engineering, though I'm in this engineer college. I was firming up the idea of being a teacher, I had a fear of not knowing what else to do. I knew teaching and it was an alternative to engineering. As I applied for university I began to form the idea that I'd been discriminated against. Eighty per cent of universities went out of the frame because I didn't have Latin or a foreign language, they wouldn't even consider me. I was disappointed because I felt I couldn't go. I was eventually offered an engineering place at Hull, and Sir John Cass to do mathematics and physics. I also applied for teacher training and got a place at Portsmouth but even there you were restricted by not having a foreign language. When the results came through I had passed physics and engineering drawing but failed mathematics. So I went to Portsmouth in 1960, where I was amongst the first of the three-year trained.

At Portsmouth, in terms of mathematics and physics I was marking time because I was streets ahead. While I was there and meeting people from a variety of schools and experiences I began to get the impression I could hold my own with these people. But I wished I was doing history, why was I doing mathematics? I was one of 7 who got the top merit award at the end of the three years but the bachelor of education (BEd) route was not available. We were told we were the precursors but they couldn't offer the extended course. I left in 1963 and went on to teach in London, Nottingham and Peterborough, eventually becoming acting head of a large community comprehensive. I did not get a degree until Harold Wilson set up the Open University. I was in the first year and graduated in 1973, ten years after my training at Portsmouth. Subsequently I was seconded from my teaching post and was awarded a Master of Science (MSc) in educational management.

I studied science subjects at school that I had no real affinity for but got to a certain level, when my real inclination was to do history. I did well at history at secondary modern and bought a history magazine where you could cut out pictures. I liked Saxon history but I suppose my own inhibitions about writing and reading held me back, I don't naturally do those things. When I became a teacher I was so happy I didn't have to spell words on the walls. I held back from leading groups in case I had to write words on flipcharts, because I knew I wouldn't be able to write them. I went to a secondary modern and was top dog and it was the same at the secondary technical college. If I'd gone to grammar school I wouldn't have been among the best, so it may not have been all roses if I'd gone in another direction, but I would have had a wider curriculum. I suppose success in a lower tier gave me the confidence to go on.

Analysis

Margaret and Don describe themselves as coming from working-class backgrounds. Margaret's mother's family had 'a very lowly background' while her father was a hardworking manual worker. Don says his family was 'upper working-class' and that they were 'humble' with 'no great aspirations'. His father was poorly educated and worked on the shop floor as an engineer. There is evidence within these stories, however, of parental efforts to increase social, cultural and economic capital, and to differentiate themselves from other people (Bourdieu, 1973; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Margaret's maternal grandfather 'rose the ladder' within his firm and the family rented a country cottage in addition to 'a nice home'. Her father's family in Canada included nurses and teachers while he himself spent time at college studying engineering. Although money was tight, her parents had 'middle-class aspirations' and her mother 'taught us to think we were better than other people'. Her father was prepared to work seven days a week to support these aspirations.

Despite a poor education and an apparent lack of desire to move up in the world, Don's father was a 'thinker' who read serious newspapers and loved opera. He hoped his only child would do better than him by becoming a draughtsman. At a critical moment, he joined the campaign for a sixth form at the nearby secondary technical college. As he rightly anticipated, this was important in providing his son with access to advanced level study and higher education.

Margaret and Don's stories show how small but often significant economic, social, cultural and circumstantial advantages may accumulate for particular individuals, and help to create conditions favourable for their social mobility (Gladwell, 2008). They were well positioned to benefit from post-war expansion, especially in white-collar, professional and managerial jobs (Devine, 2004). In addition, both respondents are exceptionally able. Don rose to the top of the class in his secondary modern and also in the secondary technical college, eventually achieving 7 GCE ordinary levels and 2 advanced levels. These were good results, especially in the context of the 1950s and early 1960s, when at least 85 per cent of children left school aged 15 or 16, with few qualifications (Robbins Report, 1963).

Don's academic ability was also evident later in his career, when he was among the first Open University students, and subsequently earned an MSc in educational management. Ten years later, in the slightly improved circumstances of the 1960s, Margaret proved equally capable (Simon, 1991). She secured entry to a grammar school, passed 7 ordinary levels and 2 advanced levels, and gained a place in higher education.

Despite his 'humble' working-class origins, Don progressed through successive appointments to become the acting principal of a large community comprehensive. By any measure, his income, status and life style were far in advance of his parents. Margaret worked consistently as a teacher, and contributed full and part-time earnings to the household budget as their children were born and grew to self-sufficiency. The BBC (2012) class

questionnaire places their household in the top 10 per cent in terms of wealth, social connections and cultural range.

Margaret and Don's secondary education spanned the period 1952–1969, almost exactly coinciding with the supposed golden years of the grammar school as an enabler of social mobility. Their subsequent lives and careers followed a trajectory less stellar than Andrew Neil's (Bell, 2012) but nevertheless represent an exceptional advance from working-class origins. To what extent did academic selection and the grammar school contribute to their progress and success?

Don was in many ways the victim of the selective system rather than its beneficiary, a bright boy excluded at age 11 rather than encouraged by the London grammar schools of the 1950s. His selection for secondary technical college at age 13 was beneficial in enabling him to access sixth form and higher education, but at the price of a narrow curriculum that restricted the options available to him.

Only three or four children from his large primary school contrived to pass the 11+ so he was less dismayed than he might have been and transferred happily to a 'purposeful' secondary modern, unaware of the longer term implications of not being chosen for an academic education. He worked hard, showed ability in mathematics and science, and won seven prizes. But his secondary school did not offer foreign languages and lacked a sixth form. Had Don remained there, the curriculum and organization of this school would have confirmed his permanent exclusion from advanced level and higher education.

At this point, however, the family relocated and Don successfully sat the 13+ examinations for entry to a secondary technical college near his new home. Quite soon he began to develop doubts about technical subjects and the career as a design engineer or draughtsman his father envisaged for him. History, his favourite subject at the secondary modern, disappeared from the curriculum. He found he was not adept with his hands and was rather frightened of machinery and workshops. But whether he liked it or not, he found himself on 'tramlines' that had been devised as an alternative to academic education, a pathway for boys (there were no girls) with an aptitude for technology that led inexorably towards employment in workshops and drawing offices.

The concept of distinctive curriculum arrangements for different 'types' of children was central to the tripartite system (grammar, technical and modern) created by the 1944 Education Act (Simon, 1991). The Norwood Report (1943) provided a rationale for selective education and expected grammar schools to provide for a few children who were capable of abstract thought. Other youngsters were considered more skilful in applying ideas in technology. Their needs should be met through selective technical schools. Most children, however, were thought to be more concerned with practical activities and the world around them. The new modern schools were designed to cater for their supposed preference for hands-on tasks. As a result of this philosophy, a large number of children were dragooned at age 11 into deterministic curriculum

structures, often unsuited to their individual needs as they became more capable and discovered new interests.

Don was permanently excluded, therefore, from languages, literature and history, mainly because Norwood and his committee members were convinced that some children possessed a technical aptitude or disposition that could be diagnosed by an IQ test. These youngsters were believed to have no future need or use for art, music, drama or poetry. Even Don's English ordinary level paper was given a technical bias, with candidates expected to explain their approach to staining a floor or repairing a puncture.

Don was fortunate, nevertheless, that the secondary technical college fought a successful campaign to establish a sixth form. Otherwise he would have had no straightforward access to advanced courses and no natural route into higher education. Access to advanced level courses was critically important for extending educational opportunities to a wider population, and in most areas this was not fully achieved until after comprehensive reorganization (Benn & Chitty, 1996). This was an unusual if heavily qualified opportunity. The only courses offered were mathematics, applied mathematics, physics, chemistry and engineering drawing. When Don came to apply for higher education he discovered that his tramlines were running out because he lacked the languages necessary for admission to most universities. When he chose a teacher training course, his much-loved history was impossible. He was obliged to follow the technical route that he had found so uncomfortable.

After 3 years at Portsmouth, he encountered another obstacle to his future upward mobility. Although he was given the top merit award, his college was unable to offer a route to the BEd qualification. The four-year BEd degree course, proposed by the Robbins Report (1963), was not introduced until 1965, when a rising birth rate led to an increase in the number of places for student teachers (Gillard, 2011).

Margaret's secondary education (1962–1969) came 10 years after Don's and the government was by then spending substantially more on education, up from 3 per cent of GDP in 1953/54 to 4.3 per cent in 1964/65 (Gillard, 2011). The number in full time education at age 17 had risen from 4 per cent in 1938 to 15 per cent by 1962 (Robbins Report, 1963). There was a growing recognition that education was important for the nation's future, and that increased investment was needed, especially to cater for the post-war 'bulge' in the school population. Comprehensive reorganization was beginning and Margaret's own grammar school was merged with the local secondary modern in 1968. When she was 12, the Robbins Report (1963) recommended an increase in full time higher education places from 216,000 in 1962/63 to 560,000 by 1980.

Although Margaret passed the 11+ and may have benefited from the early stages of these improvements in educational opportunity, her journey through secondary and higher education was remarkably similar to Don's, with her options constrained by the school's curriculum structures and the gendered assumptions made by her teachers and parents.

Margaret's parents thought girls should have a less good education and when she won a grammar school place said it should have gone to her elder brother, because he was a boy. Their own lack of cultural capital left them disoriented by her success, and their notion that she would become an Oxford don symbolizes the distance they imagined between themselves and grammar school boys and girls (Bourdieu, 1990). She had been chosen for a grammar school, described in the following terms by her local authority:

> These are the traditional type of secondary school, most of them having been established long before the passing of the 1944 Education Act. The kind of education which they provide is only suitable for children of high academic ability. There is a good deal of homework to be done and the course demands much from the pupils. So, if children who should be in modern schools are put into grammar schools, they are out of their depth. Their work becomes worse instead of better. Then they become disheartened and give up trying. Only about one child in four or five can really hold its own in a grammar school. (East Midlands Education Committee, 1961)

Margaret was the only one from her village to secure a grammar school place, however, and had an inner sense that she was shy and did not understand the language of new sports like netball. Even so, she viewed some friends and classmates as less fortunate than herself and felt comfortable, intellectually and socially. She did not suffer the unhappiness reported by some female academics, removed from working-class backgrounds by selection (Hoskins, 2012).

Although Margaret's school was deemed suitable only for those with 'high academic ability', and admitted only the brightest children from a very wide rural area and a small market town, the internal curriculum structure was almost as divisive as that prescribed by the 11+. The A form started Latin in the second year and later had the opportunity to study Spanish, while the B form was confined to French. B stream girls studied only human biology; the boys were allowed to follow courses in chemistry and physics. Students selected for the A form were entered for GCE English language a year early, to create time for English literature in the fifth year; B streamers were confined to English language. Margaret's B stream curriculum was also gendered, with a practical, domestic bias that would not have been out of place in a secondary modern of the same period.

Once this organization was established, it was difficult for children to move up and down, however hard and well they worked, because of the considerable curriculum difference between streams. Margaret does not recall anyone shifting classes, although a 'big overlap' between them was revealed when a substantial number of A form people passed 'only two or three ordinary levels'.

The A/B division continued into the sixth form in a less obvious form. Although she achieved 7 ordinary level passes, Margaret's advanced level options 'were very limited'. She could not study mathematics because the B

form had missed out on trigonometry. She was unable to take English because the B form had not taken English literature. Science was 'ruled out' because there was no progression from human biology, and B stream girls were excluded from chemistry and physics. This left advanced level cookery, needlework, and a choice between history and geography. University wasn't mentioned. Margaret drew the conclusion that she was 'not clever enough to go to university' and does not remember being encouraged or supported as an individual. Despite everything, she was one of only 11 students from her grammar school cohort of 56 who survived to achieve advanced level success. She progressed to a college of education in Manchester and afterwards embarked on a career as a teacher.

Conclusion

Observers agree that there was substantial absolute social mobility in the post-war period, as measured by comparing individual sons' and fathers' incomes (Goldthorpe, 1987; Goldthorpe & Mills, 2008; Saunders, 2010). There was more 'room at the top' and well-positioned individuals rose to meet demand, especially in expanding administrative, technological and professional occupations. These improved opportunities were matched by a slow but steady increase in the number of nineteen year olds in full time education, from 3 per cent in 1938 to 7 per cent in 1962. The percentage of each age group entering university rose from 3.2 per cent in 1954 to 4 per cent in 1962 (Robbins Report, 1963). We have the testimony of David Attenborough, Joan Bakewell, Andrew Neil and many other successful students that their particular grammar schools were very good and that they have done well in their careers (BBC4, 2012; Moore, 2011).

This evidence about a relatively small number of people (circa 4 per cent) in the baby-boomer generation does not establish that most grammar schools were a positive influence on social mobility, nor does it confirm that the selective régime extended better opportunities for able students than have been available since.

National figures demonstrate conclusively that grammar schools were part of an educational structure that rationed rather than increased opportunity. There were 118,000 students in university in 1962/63, with only 216,000 students in the full range of higher education, including teacher training. Of the 20 per cent deemed to have 'high academic ability' (East Midlands Education Committee, 1961) less than a fifth found a place in higher education. There was also a decline in the number of university entrants as a percentage of those with university entrance qualifications, from 73 per cent in 1954 to 61 per cent in 1961 (Robbins Report, 1963).

The system squeezed opportunity for grammar school students and blighted the educational prospects of almost everyone else. This was known and understood at the time. Robbins proposed a threefold increase to 350,000 university places by 1980. By 2010/11 the total of full time undergraduate

students at United Kingdom higher education institutions had risen to 1,367,330 (HESA, 2011). This is not consistent with the argument that grammar schools were in some way responsible for success and social mobility and does not support the claim that comprehensives have let down their students, especially the poor and disadvantaged. In retrospect the grammar school acted as a tourniquet on social mobility rather than as an agent of liberation.

Margaret and Don's stories provide an antidote to the golden memories of the successful few, and illustrate the complex ways in which selective education betrayed its promise. The problems they encountered, despite possessing considerable family advantages and unusual academic ability, were not personal or the result of individual weaknesses in their schools, but the consequence of a selective, gendered régime based on the false theory that different 'types' of children can be identified, separated and educated in line with their distinctive needs. Don found himself on technical 'tramlines' because his mathematical ability was greater than his skill with words. Although Margaret was believed to possess 'high academic ability', she was shunted into the grammar school's B stream, with a curriculum plainly devised for 'less academic' students, especially if they were girls.

Margaret's grammar school gave her access to GCE ordinary and advanced level examinations, however, and Don's secondary technical college established a sixth form just in time for him to benefit from post-16 education. Even so, their options were seriously constrained, with their courses geared to traditionally gendered employment routes. Don passed physics and engineering drawing, while Margaret's success was in needlework and cookery. Despite all this, they won places in teacher training colleges and were amongst the elite who made it to higher education.

The critical element in their progression was not selection or the academic quality of their schools, but access to sixth form courses and higher education (Benn & Chitty, 1996). In Margaret & Don's selective period (1952–1969) this was effective for 4 per cent of each cohort. During the comprehensive era that followed, access to sixth forms became nearly universal, and over 40 per cent gained places in higher education. A relatively small proportion of women entered university under the selective system. Today, over half of those studying for first degrees are female (Broecke & Hamed, 2008).

A fully effective national system of secondary and higher education has been established since Margaret set off for college in 1969. This has been possible partly because we live in a wealthier society that places a much greater emphasis on education for everyone, and partly because comprehensive schools have removed the many obstacles that frustrated families and children in the immediate post-war period. Selection, and the underfunding that accompanied it, inevitably reduced opportunity for all but a minority of intelligent middle-class students and an almost vanishingly small number of bright working-class children. Even gifted young people like Margaret and Don struggled to find

their way through the selective system to opportunities that matched their ability and effort.

Grammar schools may have enabled some exceptional students to achieve success, but there is no evidence of a general improvement in access and opportunity before their eclipse. On the contrary, this case study illustrates how flaws in the selective system could constrain options and blight lives. Advocates of grammar schools and selection have, therefore, a responsibility to explain how they can avoid repeating the errors of the 1950s and 1960s.

Notes

[1] The term baby-boomer is used here in relation to those born between 1946 and 1964.

[2] Also located in north London. Despite the 1944 Education Act's intention to provide 'technical' schools, only 2–3 per cent of children actually attended one. The limited number of places available meant that pupils were chosen through a separate set of voluntary examinations at age 12 or 13, rather than through the 11+ itself.

[3] The film *Rebel Without A Cause* appeared in 1955.

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