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Ending Selection in the Schools of Guernsey

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ABSTRACT This article gives an insider's account of the campaign, ultimately successful, to end the system of educational selection at age 11 on the island of Guernsey.

I moved to Guernsey as a young teacher in 1968 to take up a teaching post at the brand-new 11-16 town secondary modern. I was hopeful that St Peter Port Secondary School, with its modern facilities, would provide a pleasant and progressive working environment for its community. The students were great: streetwise, energetic town kids with lots of personality and potential, but I was shocked at the ethos of low expectations that was prevalent throughout the school at that time. My previous teaching job had been in a secondary modern school in Southampton which, after my first year there, had begun its transformation into a comprehensive school. The staff had been preparing for the change to an all-ability intake for some time, and morale and expectations were high. It had felt exciting and worthwhile to be part of this major change in direction for UK education. The contrast with what I found at St Peter Port School could hardly have been greater.

I spent 40 years in the Guernsey Education Service, in a variety of different teaching, training and managerial roles. I was active in the wider context of the service, too, always eager to contribute wherever and whenever I felt I might be able to make a difference. It was a career entirely driven by the desire to implement strategies that would give all students experiences that many would not receive otherwise. In pursuit of that aim, I came across many obstacles along the way. Some of these came from the most unexpected sources, and this was especially disappointing; most stemmed from the desire to promote and protect, either directly or indirectly, Guernsey's system of selective education, the 11+. To fully understand the grip that this anachronistic process has had on our community, it is necessary to understand a little about the island.

Tripartite Education Guernsey-style

Guernsey is a small, self-governed Crown Dependency situated in the English Channel. We have our own government, called the States of Deliberation, referred to locally as 'the States', and though we are independent from the UK, we maintain close links through the Privy Council and the Crown. The States operates through a consensus committee model populated by independent representatives known as 'Deputies' who are elected on a parish basis. We do not have party politics, but the 'flavour' of the assembly is right of centre.

Guernsey has historically operated a tripartite education system, though one that is subtly different to the tripartite system that operated throughout the UK in the middle of the last century. Students sit the 11+ and are consequently selected for one of three routes. Those who perform best in the 11+ are offered a place at one of the three grant-maintained colleges. These are independent schools that rely heavily on government subsidies for all of their students. The scholarship 'special place' holders have their fees paid in full, and each fee payer also receives a generous subsidy. The next-highest performers in terms of 11+ scores are offered places at the local grammar school and Sixth Form Centre. The remainder are offered a place at one of the three area high schools.

In recent years, the percentage of students attending one of the selective schools has fluctuated between 40 and 45 per cent. The high government subsidies to the private schools have resulted in relatively low fees and have turned them into schools of choice for nearly 30 per cent of the population. They enjoy substantial support from Guernsey's thriving finance and business sectors, and their 'old boy networks' are especially influential.

In 2011, two of the island's high schools had some of the worst GCSE results on record, and their results were forced out into the public domain for the first time. The island averages still compared favourably with UK averages, and there were a number of extenuating circumstances that impacted upon the exam results of those particular schools in that particular year (caused by political decisions made a decade earlier). But the public were in no mood to be generous and the blame game began. The high schools were condemned, their teachers were publicly castigated, and the morale of their communities sank to an all-time low. Social media was alive with misinformation, unpleasant comments and uninformed opinions. Meanwhile, the selective schools could be seen to do no wrong. Their teachers were flagged up as superior, their practices as more worthy, their ethos as exemplary; the public could not be persuaded to look beyond this for an explanation of the disparities in the GCSE results.

I was so incensed at the unfair references that were constantly being made to the high school communities that I decided, in 2012, to stand for the States. I was elected as a deputy to represent one of the two town constituencies, the one which encompassed the catchment area of St Peter Port Secondary School where I had spent the first 10 years of my teaching career in Guernsey and where I had returned as head teacher at the end of my career. I considered it a real privilege. I was elected to serve on various boards, one of which was the Education Board, and the hard work began.

Fairer, More Relevant

In 2012, around 45 per cent of students were attending one of the selective schools. Many islanders simply believed that they somehow offered a superior education. As we sat around the table for our first few board meetings it became clear that my fellow deputies did not share my conviction that the 11+ was an anachronism, unfit for purpose and, in too many cases, a destroyer of confidence rather than an enabler. The voice of the 45 per cent was being heard loud and clear; that of the 55 per cent less so.

Guernsey had not been entirely inactive, over the years, in its quest for a fairer and more relevant system of secondary education. Small groups of people had tried, and failed, to call for change. In the late 1970s, one such group of teachers and head teachers independently produced a discussion paper proposing a move to four all-ability 11-16 schools feeding a separate sixth-form college and college of further education. This was presented to the public and the then Education Board for consideration and debate. The response was immediate. It was greeted with derision by the staff at the two single-sex grammar schools of the time and their alumni, many of whom threw their academic weight behind engagement with the media. The Director of Education labelled it 'a recipe for mediocrity', a phrase that is still in use today. Instead, it was decided to build a new co-ed grammar school and maintain the secondary moderns. I was particularly disappointed as I was one of the authors of that discussion paper.

The next concerted attempt to reorganise the secondary structure of education came in 2001, when a brave and committed president of the then Education Board took proposals to the States to create four 11-16 comprehensive schools and a tertiary post-16 institution. Powerful arguments were put forward on both sides and the island was divided in opinion. The secondary moderns had largely been neglected in terms of capital investment, whereas the new co-ed grammar school boasted an impressive range of up-to-date facilities. It was plain to see how the system of selection was hugely divisive in terms of the opportunities that the different routes could offer students. Guilt is a powerful tool, but the desire by some to maintain selection at any cost proved more powerful. A last-minute amendment defeated the Education Board's proposals by promising brand-new rebuilds of all the secondary moderns to bring them in line with the grammar school. Guilt had been momentarily assuaged, but 17 years later it looks likely that that promise will now never be fully honoured.

Against this backdrop, our Education Board set about working to identify and correct the many shortcomings in the Guernsey Education Service. Our agreed aim was to improve its performance and its accountability. At my insistence, a review of selection at 11 was one of our stated work streams. I recognised, however, that it would almost certainly be the one that would require the most work to reach a consensus, and therefore any discussion concerning its relevance would almost certainly be delayed in favour of addressing less contentious issues. In 2013 we produced a blueprint for change

across all phases of island education. It was entitled 'Today's Learners, Tomorrow's World' and, unusually for politicians, we wrote part of it ourselves. It received almost unanimous support when we placed it before the States, who gave us the go-ahead to move forward with the various work streams. We had established a set of values that were to form the touchstone of our work, with a focus on inclusion and the child as central to all aspects of learning. Performance improvement across all phases was prioritised in our planning and many initiatives were introduced that have subsequently resulted in substantial improvements across the service.

Social Immobility

Underpinning any form of meaningful progress was the thorny subject of the 11+. The range of positions declared by members of the Education Board at an early stage had prevented a speedy solution to the issue, but it was clearly one that needed to be addressed and, for me at least, the sooner the better. I had a wealth of research evidence, and others were gathering it too, from local data, international data and sources such as the all-party campaign organisation Comprehensive Future, whose contributions were extremely helpful. Local data on social mobility proved to all the board members that the current system was not providing one of the most frequently claimed benefits of the selection process. As Guernsey does not offer free school meals, we looked at the educational pathways of children from social housing as an indicator of social mobility. We found no evidence that a single child from social housing had attended any of the grant-maintained colleges in the previous 10 years. In addition, very few of them had made it through to the grammar school. We examined the current funding structures for secondary schools and saw how special placeholders at the grammar school and colleges were placed at an advantage in comparison with their contemporaries in the high schools. It was enough to convince my four political colleagues on the board that change was urgently needed.

An island-wide consultation process, taking a variety of forms, was set up and the results collated and noted. Meaningful analysis proved impossible, given that there was substantial evidence to suggest that vested interest groups, defending the status quo, had been better prepared for engagement than those that had voted for change. However, that didn't deter those who wished to pin their argument on any one particular statistic, quoted out of context, and with no real understanding of its worth. Wild claims were made about teachers' views on the selective system, and many found it difficult to speak publicly on the subject for fear of upsetting their students and their parents. A poll was set up by a small group of teachers, offering each of their colleagues throughout the island one chance to vote on their preferred option for children at age 11. More than seventy per cent of respondents declared their wish to end selection at 11. A second poll was authorised by the Education Department. It returned

similar results. There could be no doubt that the majority of Guernsey teachers did not agree with selection at 11.

It had taken our Education Board three years to reach the unanimous decision that the 11+ was not in the best interests of all our island children. Finally we agreed that we should take steps to try to end it. The timescale was such that we put forward our proposal to the States of Deliberation right at the end of our term of office. This was far from ideal, and very frustrating for me, but it did at least ensure that we all approached the debate with the same sense of conviction and purpose. In reality, there is no 'debate' as such in the States of Deliberation. Instead, each deputy has the right to speak just once, at a time to suit themselves, on any particular proposal. Therefore, it was essential that we should time our individual speeches to have the most impact. We delivered five well-researched, passionate and coordinated speeches, supported by others from like-minded deputies, and all with significant input from the teaching profession, the associations and head teachers from all phases of education. By the narrowest of margins, we won the final vote.

Inclusive

In spite of strong resistance from certain predictable quarters, the professional view had managed to persuade public opinion, and we had managed to persuade our government that our system of selection at 11 should end, and that the island should move towards all-ability state-run secondary schools as soon as was practicable. It was a very special day in the history of Guernsey's hitherto elitist and divisive education system. Our board members were proud to have taken such a radical proposal for change to Guernsey's conservatively minded assembly. We had done it with determination and conviction, we had provided hard evidence combined with meticulous reasoning, and we had won. The concept of inclusive secondary education had finally been accepted and endorsed by the government and we could now move into a new era for Guernsey's education system that would ensure much fairer outcomes for all our children.

Three of the original signatories to the 1970s paper are no longer with us, but I know they would be delighted to see that their original efforts finally gained the political support required, even though it did take nearly four decades.

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