FORUM
Volume 61, Number 2, 2019
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.2.189

Why Don't We Love Comprehensive Schools Like We Love the NHS?

CAROLYN ROBERTS

ABSTRACT In this article the author remarks on the difference in genesis between the National Health Service (NHS) and comprehensive schools. She argues that we need to develop a clear national understanding of the purpose of schools in society in order to make all-ability schools as popular as the NHS. Finally, she suggests a set of principles upon which a new public education could be built.

Here's Alfie, 14. Life's dealt him a bad hand. Home is chaos and adults betray him. School's a sort of refuge: he doesn't do classroom work, but there are three or four people to trust. They feed him, listen and give him clean clothes. He's got friends but people bug him.

Milly's 14. Her hand offers promise. Home is calm and adults fuss. She's good at classwork and expects to do well: medicine, at a decent university. She's got friends, though some people bug her. She likes her teachers, but supply teachers are all losers, so Dad usually rings to complain when she gets one, or when she gets a low mark.

At the end of the day Alfie and Milly take different directions out of the school gate. Sir smiles at them and bids them good night. He congratulates Milly on her performance in Assembly, looks at Alfie's daily report card, rolls his eyes theatrically at both of them.

In this school rich and poor breathe the same air. The gods that smile on Milly smile on Alfie and, within the walls, hold him together. Next day he brings a knife into school and can't explain why. If he's permanently excluded, there's a better than even chance he'll end up in prison, and from there? Dead before 30?

Sir on the gate talks to Miss who's knows Alfie's social worker. They investigate, then go to the head and are nearly flattened by an exiting teacher union rep. At this end of the day, the head's dishevelled and irritated. Milly's dad's been on the phone to complain about disruption in tutor-group reading

time, the rep says Alfie's impossible. Sir and Miss tell the Head about the knife. She bangs her head on the desk and looks at them for a long time. 'PX?' says Sir. 'PX,' she says.[1]

*****

Milly and Alfie are in the same tutor group at a large, successful comprehensive school. They're heirs of a post-war promise of quality education for all that took some time to develop. Though Beveridge identified ignorance as a giant obstructing the road to reconstruction, the National Health Service (NHS) was more radical than its parallel 1944 Education Act, which was realised in segregated grammar, technical and modern schools for England's 11-year-olds. Eventually, when the nation could afford it, the Department of Education and Science looked at the egalitarian dream of the growing comprehensive schools and sought a better way for all.

Therefore, in 1965, Circular 10/65, 'The Organisation of Secondary Education', boldly stated the government's objective to end selection and eliminate separatism, stated in a House of Commons motion of 21 January 1965:

> That this House, conscious of the need to raise educational standards at all levels, and regretting that the realisation of this objective is impeded by the separation of children into different types of secondary schools, notes with approval the efforts of local authorities to reorganise secondary education on comprehensive lines which will preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for those children who now receive it and make it available to more children; recognises that the method and timing of such reorganisation should vary to meet local needs; and believes that the time is now ripe for a declaration of national policy.

In this, they hoped to create something very particular in the nation's schools. Circular 10/65 affirmed that

> [a] comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process. (Department of Education and Science, 1965)

Though difficult, the task was honourable and worthy of brave endeavour:

> The Government are aware that the complete elimination of selection and separatism in secondary education will take time to achieve… But the spontaneous and exciting progress which has been made in this direction by so many authorities in recent years demonstrates that the objective is not only practicable; it is also now

> widely accepted. The Government believe that both the education service and the general public will welcome the further impetus which a clear statement of national policy will secure. (Department of Education and Science, 1965)

It has not proved quite so simple. Years before Circular 10/65,

> the NHS was created out of the ideal that good healthcare should be available to all, regardless of wealth. When it was launched by the then minister of health, Aneurin Bevan, on July 5 1948, it was based on 3 core principles:
> – that it meet the needs of everyone
> – that it be free at the point of delivery
> – that it be based on clinical need, not ability to pay.
> (https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/about-the-nhs/principles-and-values/)

Echoing Beveridge's pride, the NHS Constitution of 2017 says clearly that 'the NHS belongs to the people':

> It is there to improve our health and wellbeing, supporting us to keep mentally and physically well, to get better when we are ill and, when we cannot fully recover, to stay as well as we can to the end of our lives. It works at the limits of science – bringing the highest levels of human knowledge and skill to save lives and improve health. It touches our lives at times of basic human need, when care and compassion are what matter most.
>
> The NHS is founded on a common set of principles and values that bind together the communities and people it serves – patients and public – and the staff who work for it. (Department for Health and Social Care, 2015)

On the NHS website this is followed by warm words about respect, human rights, 'a wider social duty to promote equality through the services it provides', and values 'that inspire passion'.

Is there something similar on the DfE website? There are seven current 'principles', in contrasting tone:

> World-class education:
> – ensure our academic standards match and keep pace with key comparator nations
> – strive to bring our technical education standards in line with leading international systems
> – ensure that education builds character, resilience and well-being
>
> To achieve this, we will:

– remember that in education and care, by far the most important factor is the people delivering it – so we will strive to recruit, develop and retain the best
– prioritise in all we do the people and places left behind, the most disadvantaged
– protect the autonomy of institutions by intervening only where clear boundaries are crossed
– make every pound of our funding count.
(Department for Education, 2018)

Why do the medics get warmth and passion and the teachers functionality, competitiveness and resilience? Why don't we describe our universal service for our children with similar pride and joy? Why didn't we dance about comprehensive schools at the 2012 London Olympics?

Education, like the health service, is rooted in every community. It has bases which, as the district size increases, include larger institutions of greater specialism. It has professional and para-professional staff trained at the state's expense. It is free at the point of delivery and equally accessible to all. Its young professionals are filled with zeal to make the world a better place, its old hands repositories of community wisdom. The parallels are clear, so why is protecting the NHS a political shibboleth, where education is doomed to being perpetually 'transformed', and put at the service of the economy?

My Milly and Alfie parable would be heard differently if it were a health story where Alfie was made dangerously physically ill by virtue of his childhood neglect. Stories might appear about the best possible care and about research devoted to analysing and preventing such disease: a Save Alfie campaign or Alfie's Fund might be set up to help similarly afflicted young people 'so that no one goes through what Alfie went through'.

As it is presented, in school, responses would be very mixed. Stories might appear about Milly's chances of being affected by Alfie's mere presence in the same building, demanding draconian punishment for Alfie which removes him from education or imprisons him lest what he has become infects others. Pundits would argue that Milly's education can only be effected without Alfie in the way – commentators would long for girls' schools, grammar schools or private schools, or blame the teachers or the child in a way utterly untransferable to health.

Good healthcare is a springboard to life, as opposed to death, the universal leveller. Education is a springboard to potential prosperity, quite the opposite. We love the NHS because the dream of equality in times of most need is irrefutably demonstrated. Perhaps we don't love comprehensive schools because the dream of equality in childhood is undermined by inequality in adult life. We blame education for the inequality and we blame schools for not privileging us.

This is obviously unreasonable. It is, however, rooted in the problem explored above. We know what the NHS is for: to keep us alive and care for us

equally and freely at our most vulnerable. We don't know what schools are for. Therefore, we don't know what contract we have with our schools for the nation's children. Therefore we judge them by changing standards, the pursuit of which skews and obscures what we actually need them to do.

So what are schools for? Schools are where society looks after its young until they are old enough to take on adult citizenship. Teachers and school leaders work with and for children and the state in loco parentis. Children are simultaneously our most vulnerable citizens and the good citizens of the future.

Schools, therefore, have two core social functions. First, they teach children what society wants them to learn. Second, they develop in children the characteristics of adult citizenship. It is impossible to rank or separate these priorities.

Left to their own devices, children have idiosyncratic priorities. Schools have to coax most of them into learning. We do this by painting a vivid picture of the benefits of education. If you work hard and do as you are told, you'll succeed and live a successful and happy adult life.

There are schools where this is more or less true. The outputs and attitudes of those educated exclusively in private schools [2] or selectively in grammar schools are exceptionally well matched to adult success. It is bizarre, then, that current education policy often appears to believe that 'if only all our children went to schools like the public schools or the grammar schools, they would all be as successful as the children who went to those schools'. They are not scalable because that 'success' depends upon their exclusivity.

The left-wing thinker E.D. Hirsch was outrageously misused by right-wing education policy-makers in England in the early 2000s. Hirsch prophesied that the disaffected in the USA would remain so as long as their education was fragmented and unpredictable:

> Nothing could be more important to our national wellbeing than overcoming these inequities… But something equally significant is at stake. Many observers have deplored the decline in civility in our public life and with it the decline in our sense of community. The inter-ethnic hostilities ... the astonishing indifference to the condition of our children all bespeak a decline in the communitarian spirit. The common school's most important contribution [could be] preserving the fragile fabric of our democracy. (Hirsch, 1996, p. 238)

This notion of public education as the common school has never been fully explored in England. The slow development of comprehensives never led to a single, theoretised, well-funded system. Despite most parents' happiness with their children's school, the tone of national discourse is that comprehensive schools are a compromise solution to avoid if you're rich or clever enough. Despite the fact that Alfie and Milly like being educated together and both feel it prepares them well for a world of all sorts, the national view is that

comprehensives needs reforming, restructuring, or, worst of all, 'transforming' into something else altogether.

The real dream of comprehensive education is one of model communities serving society, building up its children and its citizenry. This was tentatively conceptualised in the introduction to the revised national curriculum of 2008:

> Education influences and reflects the values of society, and the kind of society we want to be. Education should reflect the enduring values that contribute to personal development and equality of opportunity for all, a healthy and just democracy, a productive economy, and sustainable development. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008)

As it is, education does appear to reflect society, one that is fragmented, elitist, rent by frighteningly toxic politics and feeding unequal economies on an endangered planet. Is that what we want? How can we build a better system?

The philosopher John Rawls said that all social institutions should be set up as if from behind a 'veil of ignorance', from where 'no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like' (Rawls, 1999). If education policy-makers adopted this philosophical thought-experiment, they would think differently. If everyone's children went to schools in the public education system, those schools would have to work for everyone. Any considerations irrelevant to the development of a common, just education system (such as wealth or selection by ability) would have to be removed. It is this clarity, this purity, that is at the root of the NHS's attraction.

So, if we could agree that schools are where society looks after its young until they're able to take on the mantle of adult citizenship, we must want schools to be what we want society to be.

How might this work? Let's pose five potential social values:

1. *All people should be equally valued.*
Schools must be flexible to meet the needs and maximise the potential of all children so they may compete fairly in the adult world.

a. Schools should be funded for flexibility. Some children, for example, will need 1:1 teaching, or more.
b. National longitudinal research projects should track the future success and prosperity of school leavers so that the system may be adjusted where necessary.
c. Selection by ability, which disadvantages poor children and is damaging to communities, should end.

2. *All people should be kind* to one another and take particular care of the most vulnerable. Schools must demonstrate kindness and safeguarding as part of their flexibility.

a. The concept of permanent exclusion needs to end. Schools need intensive funding to meet every child's needs while safeguarding other children.
b. Intensive therapeutic intervention should be available for all children who need it so that they are ready for adult life.
c. Schools should be the first point of contact for safeguarding. Children's social care should be highly funded and based in schools.

3. *All people should keep the law* which protects us all. Schools should devise just and consistent rules which train children to understand that putting others before self is the key to a happy society.

a. Schools must devise behaviour policies which build up the common good and a tolerant citizenry. Fair, consistent and rational rules which build up community life are preferable to zero-tolerance posturing.
b. Adults working with children must set a good example using the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education (Chartered College of Teaching, 2019).

4. *All people should seek to understand the world and change it for the better.* Schools should share powerful and deep learning with children so that they may add to human knowledge.

a. Teaching should be highly valued. Entry standards should be high and training include theoretical pedagogy and child development as well as exceptional subject knowledge. (For more on this theme, see Young, 2007; Young et al, 2014.)
b. Creativity and self-expression should be both taught and enabled so that humanity might flourish. (For more on this theme, see Eisner, 2002.)

5. *All people should seek to build up the common good*, so schools must be free and open to all and educating *all* the community's children.

a. Private and selective schools must become part of the public education system. Schools should educate all local children to the highest standard together no matter what their income and background.

In order to turn this into a school system, I take for granted the following conditions:

- Clear, stable central direction so that the purpose of schooling is understood by citizens.
  – The Department for Education should be replaced by a new public education service independent of politics and reporting to government.
- Stable and sufficient funding which reflects the importance of children to society.

– A just and transparent funding formula which enables schools to meet very high social expectations.
– Intelligent accountability by a highly trained inspectorate. This should be sufficient in numbers and expertise to study schools carefully and independently, offer support where needed and commission the longitudinal research needed to accurately assess success.

- Ethical conduct by all concerned.

– The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education as a basic expectation.

- A reframing of teaching.

– Teaching to be better paid and require high entry standards so that quality is assured.

In this way, the public education system would be conceptualised in the same way as the NHS so that:

- it meet the needs of everyone;
- it be free at the point of delivery;
- it be based on need, not ability to pay.

Then we could say that the new public education service [ES] would, likewise, belong to the people. Echoing and adapting words used by the NHS, we could declare:

> It is there to build our learning and character, supporting us to maintain a just and stable society, to push forward the boundaries of human knowledge and encourage lifelong learning and service. It works at the limits of learning – bringing the highest levels of human knowledge and skill to build cooperation and creativity and improve the way we live. It touches our lives at our time of most important development, when forging the bonds of interdependence will be most successful.
>
> The ES is founded on a common set of principles and values that bind together the communities and people it serves – adults and children – and the staff who work for it.

It seems unlikely that the removal of fee-paying and selective schools will be achieved in my lifetime. However, the development of the new public education need not wait. Generously funded successful, happy and safe new public schools led and staffed by well-paid competitively recruited public intellectuals with advanced interpersonal skills, backed up by the best research in the world, would soon be the preferred option for any thinking parent. No one would consider having a heart transplant in the local private hospital because the research and expertise are unarguably superior in the NHS; in the same way, no parent would want anything less for her child than that which the new public

school provides. Why pay for education into a small world if free education opens all the doors?

*****

The head looks again at the PX paperwork for Alfie and searches her soul. She can't afford the staffing to keep him, make him better and protect other children at the same time. Those to whom she reports have said that there is no money to safeguard Alfie's future, while agreeing that keeping him in prison will be expensive when it happens. She thinks about other things that were wrongly thought to be doomed to fail: D-Day, the NHS and the blessed 2012 Olympics themselves. She wonders what cowardice stops us wanting to do a better job with the nation's children. She longs for the day when people dance in appreciation of the world-renowned Education Service of the United Kingdom.

Notes

[1] PX refers to permanent exclusion.

[2] I use 'private' for the whole fee-paying sector, including the archaically named 'public' schools.

References

Chartered College of Teaching (2019) Navigating the Educational Moral Maze. https://chartered.college/ethical-leadership-commission

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) The New Secondary Curriculum. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/revised-secondary-curriculum-introduced-in-schools-in-september-2008 2010

Department for Education (2018) Department for Education Single Departmental Plan. https://doi.org/10.1037/e486612006-001

Department of Education and Science (1965) Circular 10/65 (1965) The Organisation of Secondary Education. http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/des/circular10-65.html

Department of Health & Social Care (2015) The NHS Constitution for England. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nhs-constitution-for-england/the-nhs-constitution-for-england

Eisner, E.W. (2002) *The Arts and the Creation of Mind.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hirsch, E.D. (1996) *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them.* New York: Anchor Books.

Rawls, J. (1999) *A Theory of Justice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Young, M.F.D. (2007) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: from social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education.* London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203073667

Young, M.F.D., Lambert, D., Roberts, C. & Roberts, M. (2014) *Knowledge and the Future School: curriculum and social justice.* London: Bloomsbury.

CAROLYN ROBERTS has taught in comprehensive schools since 1983. She was the head of two comprehensive schools in the north-east of England and currently leads Thomas Tallis School, a large community comprehensive in London. She was Honorary Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders for four years, Chair of the Ethical Leadership Commission in 2017-2019, and is convener of the Ethics Committee of the Chartered College of Teaching, of which she is a Founding Fellow. She has written on ethical leadership and the curriculum. *Correspondence*: croberts@thomastallis.org.uk