

# Comprehensive Schools

## Historical genesis and philosophical reflection

*Richard Pring*

### Abstract

This article sifts the historical and philosophical soil out of which the comprehensive ideal in education has sprung. England's national school system emerged in the nineteenth century imbued with ruling-class assumptions about the education required for each supposed type of child destined to take his or her place in one of the three broad social strata. Continual activity through the organisations of the working class, coupled with the changing needs of a developing economy, helped give rise to the demand for a common school. But a tripartite system persisted across the twentieth century, buttressed by the work of influential psychologists and psychometricians. This settlement began to be adequately challenged only when the first handful of comprehensive schools established themselves in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

**Keywords:** comprehensive education; social class; practical and craft work; common school

### Introduction

The development of a 'comprehensive system of education' has a long history, accompanied by associated philosophical assumptions, which had their respective impacts upon that development. One might refer here to the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, promoting the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number'; the idealism of Matthew Arnold, arguing in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) for access to 'the best that has been thought and said'; or the socialism of William Morris, influentially given in his paper 'On Art and Socialism' (1881). Too often debates on the birth and growth of the comprehensive system neglect this historical context as though the present can be separated from the past in our understanding. But, as Seamus Heaney once said, 'hope and history rhyme'. Not to see such a 'rhyme' may lessen the grounds for hope.

It may initially, therefore, be surprising (but it ought not to be) that the historical analysis begins with the nineteenth century, at a time when the very thought of comprehensive education would hardly have entered the heads of those responsible for schooling, as witness the major Royal commissions on schools, namely:

- Newcastle Commission, 1858-61, *Popular Education in England*, concerned only with elementary schools;
- Clarendon Commission, leading to the Public Schools Act of 1868, concerned then

only with the nine elite public schools;

- Taunton Commission, *Endowed Grammar and Proprietary Schools*, leading to the Endowed Schools Act of 1889.

In all those commission reports, there was assumed without argument that there were three types of school serving the needs and qualities of three social types of pupil namely: the future 'clerisy' (to use Coleridge's word for the 'governing class'); the growing number of those destined to be 'head-workers' to meet changing economic needs; and the future 'hand-workers' required for manual labour. Thereby was explicitly reinforced the social divisions within society.

Subsequent developments lay in questioning such social and thereby educational distinctions, and thus institutional divisions – the beginnings, therefore, of the gradual though slow approach to finally thinking about the comprehensive ideal.

### **The continuing significance of social class**

These social class divisions within society severely shaped the divisions within schooling when a national system began to emerge in the 1830s, and indeed to some extent continued to do so, one might say, until the present time. But behind that division were distinctive views of the kinds of education required for these different classes. Robert Lowe (in charge of the Education Department, member of the Newcastle Commission, and originator of 'payment by results') argued reluctantly that, with regard to the lowest tier of schooling, namely, the elementary schools: 'I believe it will be absolutely necessary to compel our future masters [*sic*] to learn their letters' (quoted in Simon, 1960, p355).

Whilst, on the other hand, if the lower classes were to be educated so as to be qualified for the power which had passed into their hands, then the higher classes would require to be better educated in order to preserve their position by 'superior education and superior cultivation', and thereby assert their authority by their 'greater intelligence and leisure'. In doing so, the higher class: 'might conquer back by means of a wider and more enlightened cultivation some of the influence which they have lost by political change (Lowe, 1867, 1, pp8-10).

That 'wider and more enlightened cultivation' was to be found in the classical studies – the languages and literature of Latin and Greek, and the histories of the Greek and Roman civilisations. This was clearly expressed by Firth in his history of Winchester College:

The curriculum was almost exclusively classical ... All this rested on the belief, typical of an aristocratic age, that in the classics were to be found, perfectly expressed, all the principles and mental discipline required to train the statesman, the divine and the gentleman ... Critical judgment, taste and facility were held to flow as a natural

consequence from a natural training in Greek and Latin. (Firth, 1949, p107.)

## **Growing pressure from the working class**

At the other end of the social spectrum was the working class with a minimum of education (basic literacy), provided by elementary schools, from which some of the boys would move into apprenticeships. The apprentice would be indentured to a master for seven years acquiring practical skills and know-how, very different from the cultural acquisitions for the upper classes. But it is important, in looking ahead to the eventual evolution into a comprehensive system of education, to understand that such practical ability and knowledge would rightly come to be seen as part of, not distinct from, that cultivation of the intellect, of which Matthew Arnold wrote in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).

Thus, Richard Sennett (2008) in *The Craftsman* criticised the demeaning of 'intelligent practice', thereby drawing: 'fault lines dividing theory and practice, technique and expression, craftsman and artist, maker and user ... But the past life of craft and craftsmen also suggests ways of using tools, organising bodily movements, thinking about materials which remain alternative, viable proposals about how to conduct life with skill'.

Such a contrasting understanding of intelligent practice, central to human flourishing (and thus a central aspect of the 'educated person') was therefore argued strongly in the Spens Report (1938), leading up to the 1944 Education Act (quoted Chapter 3, px):

We are aware that there are some who would limit the term education to the discipline of faculty and the culture of character by means of the more humane and generous studies, and would deny the name instruction in those practical arts and sciences by means of which man becomes a craftsman or a bread-winner. But this is an impossible limitation as things now stand. We have just seen that the training in classics may have as little liberal culture in it as instruction in a practical art (p58).

Thus, Matthew Crawford, in setting forth the theme of his argument in *The Case for Working with Your Hands* emphasised that: 'The disappearance of tools [and manual competence, p2] from our common education is the first step towards a wider ignorance of the world of artefacts we inhabit ... I quickly realised that there was more thinking going on in the bike shop than in my previous job at the think tank' (Chapter 2, px).

However, the movements and associations of working-class men for education went further than the recognition of intelligent practice, crucial though that was. There was increasing demand for better education, manifest particularly in the voices of the several societies within the Socialist Democratic Federation (SDF), which included such bodies as the London Working Men's Association (founded in 1836) and the Miners Association of Great Britain and Ireland. As Thomas Mann argued, leader of the miners'

and dockers' strikes in the late nineteenth century, and popularly supported from within the SDF: 'The demand we, as workmen, now make is for leisure, not idleness. Leisure to think, to learn, to acquire knowledge, to enjoy, to develop, in short, leisure to live' (Simon, 1965, p40).

And further: 'We claim more – we yearn for culture, we demand opportunities for physical and mental development, and we openly and fearlessly declare war against all that ends to keep us riveted to the earth'.

In subsequent developments, we can see the influence of such writers as Matthew Arnold and William Morris. The editor's introduction to the 1932 edition of Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* states that:

There is indeed another kind of culture than that derived from the best that has been known and thought in the world ... It is the culture that springs from the common life of the people, the culture which means cultivation of the ordinary soul of the human spirit, which sanctifies the work that men do with their hands and makes significant and beautiful the labour wherewith they earn their bread. (pxxxv.)

Furthermore, William Morris's influential paper, published in 1861, entitled 'On Art and Socialism', argues strongly for the aesthetic delight and appreciation as essential aspects of the practical and craft work they are engaged in, including as part of that educational enhancement the artistic beautifying of the workplace. Similar demands for the aesthetic dimension to be cultivated, in this wider understanding of education for the working class as much as for everyone else, came also from John Ruskin.

The importance of this brief historical reference and detail, with regard to the slow evolution to a comprehensive system of education, lies in the growing recognition of values, achievements and forms of understanding (not recognised in the dominant culture), which might and should be seen as integral to human flourishing, and thus an important aspect of education for everyone irrespective of social class.

## **Need for technical knowledge in the curriculum**

The changing economic scene of the growing industrial society of the second half of the nineteenth century gave rise to the need for the development of technical education, especially to meet the requirements of the engineering industries – a need not recognised in the education provided by the elementary schools of the Newcastle Commission, the endowed grammar schools of the Taunton Commission or the public schools of the Clarendon Commission. To meet such a need, there were instituted technical schools and institutes, the schools eventually forming a tier between the elementary and endowed grammar schools – a system which was reflected in the post-1944 secondary system of modern, technical and grammar schools. Prior to that, however, in recognising increasing popular aspirations and industrial needs, the elementary schools were

being divided in many localities into higher-grade elementary schools and the others. By 1895, there were as many as sixty-seven higher grade schools with nearly 25,000 scholars (see Simon, 1965, p179, for details). Thus, there was an increasing recognition of different abilities and different economic needs, reflected in a hierarchy of schools within the overall system, each under a different financial arrangement, and promoted by such examination bodies as the Royal Society of the Arts and the City and Guilds of London Institute, and by the government's National Association for the Promotion of Technological and Secondary Education.

### **A comprehensive solution?**

It was, therefore, the Bryce Commission into secondary education (established following the 1870 Education Act) which addressed many of these issues by questioning the division of secondary education into so many kinds and hierarchies. In a memorial to the Bryce committee, the TUC defined secondary education as that which follows, but continues, primary or elementary education, and argued that all children should be educated in a: “common school” and thus realise and enjoy in their youth common interests and pursuits as the children of one country’ (Bryce Commission, Vol.V., pp494-8).

Therefore, what seemed to be happening was:

- expansion of educational numbers, as a result of the 1880 Education Act, which made education compulsory for all young people up to the age of fifteen;
- greater diversity of employment possibilities and therefore the need for those school-leavers to be better prepared in terms of relevant knowledge and practical competence;
- the need for all to be so educated in civic and political knowledge as to be able to contribute as citizens in the newly enfranchised political system;
- the sharing of common interests across the social and ability spectrum.

Such sentiments were reflected in the announcement by H.A.L. Fisher, formerly vice-chancellor of Sheffield University but then appointed president of the board of education, in his speech in Newcastle in 1916: ‘Education dispels the hideous clouds of class suspicion and softens the asperities of faction ... The sense of the value of education as an end in itself, as one of the constituent elements in human happiness, is now widely spread amongst the manual workers of the country’ (*Times Educational Supplement*, 19 April, 1917).

Furthermore, R. H. Tawney, a powerful and influential advocate at this time for a common schooling through his widely read arguments (outlined in his book *Equality*), emphasised that:

The purpose of the educationist is to aid their [all children's] growth. It should be

easy to regard them not as employers or workmen, or masters and servants, or rich or poor, but merely as human beings. Here, if anywhere, the spirit of equality might be expected to establish its kingdom. Here, if anywhere, it should be possible to forget the tedious vulgarities of income and social position, in a common affection for the qualities which belong to man himself, and in a common attempt to improve them by cultivation. (Tawney, 1931/38, p141)

Thus a broader sense of education was gradually emerging, namely, one which:

- recognised a more encompassing sense of intelligence both theoretical and practical;
- saw the relevance to all young people of the inherited culture (in the words of Matthew Arnold, ‘the best that has been thought and said’) including the aesthetic;
- promoted a respect for all in terms of ‘the qualities which belong to man himself’;
- and recognised, too, the importance of a politically educated citizenry.

Such a broader sense would suggest to a growing number a ‘common school’.

### **Hesitant move to the comprehensive schools**

The Spens Report (1938), despite contrary pressures from the Labour Party and the emerging proposals for the ‘common school’, supported a ‘tripartite system’ of secondary education, comprising grammar, technical and modern schools. The diversity of views led to a further committee that in 1943 produced the Norwood Report, which advocated the tripartite system on the grounds of the ‘nature of the children’, there being here different kinds of children, relevant to the type of secondary education to be provided: first, the few capable of abstract thought and learning for its own sake; second, some more apt in the application of ideas in technology; third, the majority who were able to engage in practical activities connected with the immediate environment.

It was as though the arguments, observations and recommendations from the different bodies within the broader community – for example, the practical intelligence of the apprentice, the broad sense of culture of Arnold, the complex knowledge and insight of technology, the plea for common activities in creating a more equal society – had been completely ignored. As a later commentator suggested: ‘Seldom has a more unscientific or more unscholarly attitude disgraced the report of a public committee ... The suggestion of the committee seems to be that the Almighty has benevolently created three types of child in just those proportions which would gratify educational administrators’ (Curtis, 1952, pp114-5).

However, the Ministry of Education Circular in 1945 (*The Nation’s School*), following up the 1944 Education Act, argued strongly against comprehensive schools. New secondary schools should be for working class children (roughly 70 per cent of total intake): ‘whose

future employment will not demand any measure of technical skill or knowledge’.

It was as though the development of educational thinking, especially the demands of the working class over the decades, had been ignored (‘We claim more – we yearn for culture ... we openly and fearlessly declare war against all that tends to keep us riveted to the earth’).

However, such a division between three different types of child, which validated the foundation of the tripartite system, was no longer based on social class divisions, but on intellectual ability, so justified by the research of the psychologist Cyril Burt (Burt, 1933, pp28-9):

The psychologist understands inborn, all-round intellectual ability. It is inherited, or at least innate, not due to teaching or training; it is intellectual, not emotional or moral, and remains uninfluenced by industry or zeal; it is general, not specific, i.e. it is not limited to any particular kind of work, but enters into all that we do or think. Of our mental qualities, it is the most far-reaching: fortunately, it can be measured with accuracy.

Thus, in 1949, this author took the 11+ examination, which enabled him to enter the grammar school. Only two in the very large A stream of his primary school failed the test. Of the large number of pupils in the B stream, only two passed. In effect, selection took place at the age of ten.

Doubts, however, began to arise about the validity and accuracy of such measurements. Philip Vernon (1952 and 1959) demonstrated that the IQ score could be raised as much as fourteen points through systematic coaching, which happened at many schools (especially of those in the A stream), and helpful coaching books could be bought by anxious parents (as they were by those of this author). This finally led to Edward Boyle, when secretary of state for education, declaring in the foreword to the Newsom Report in 1963: ‘The essential point is that all children should have an equal opportunity of acquiring intelligence and of developing their talents and abilities to the full’.

It is interesting to note that the one boy from the road on which I lived who failed his 11+ examination and who went to the local ‘modern’ school (then still referred to as the elementary school) disappeared from my life for thirty or more years, until we met at a dinner at St John’s College Oxford, when I was first appointed as director of the education department. He had a post-doctoral fellowship, having been a professor at Imperial College London – a brilliant mathematician. When asked how he came to fail his 11+, he replied that he could see so many possible answers to the question that he could not put pen to paper. He left school at age fifteen to go to Rotherham Technical College, where his tutor became aware of his extreme talent in mathematics. Evidently whilst other students were reading comics for pleasure, he was reading algebra.

## Conclusion

The Spens Report, leading up to the 1944 Education Act, and the subsequent papers and reports referred to, though ultimately supporting the tripartite system of modern, technical and grammar schools, did not determine the major legislation of the 1944 Act. There remained leeway for the growing aspirations of many for the common school based on the doubts and reasons which had emerged over the many decades since the nineteenth century. It remained a struggle against those who sought to retain grammar schools rather than having them destroyed where comprehensive schools (in being truly comprehensive) were to replace them. But in various places comprehensive schools were developed through popular wishes, particularly (as in the post-war London school plan) those which had been devastated by wartime bombing, or on new housing estates. By 1958, there were as many as twenty-six comprehensive schools in the wider London area, but all achieved without the destruction of grammar schools. In such schools the divisions between ‘three types of children’ declined in significance. Design and technology, though unfortunately it was not included in the EBacc subjects introduced in 2010, could be on the timetable for all, and Arnold’s ideal of education being the cultivation of the intellect became a real possibility for everyone.

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**RICHARD PRING** retired in 2003 after fourteen years as First Professor of Education at Oxford University. His latest books include *Thinking Philosophically about Education*, *Challenges for Religious Education*, *Future of Publicly Funded Faith Schools*. Forthcoming is *Education, Social Reform and Philosophical Development: Evidence from the Past, Principles for the Future*.

richard.pring@education.ox.ac.uk