The comprehensive college

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Abstract

Education can be viewed as having both social and individual purpose, and our experience of it can be shaped by both a selective mindset and a comprehensive idea. The comprehensive idea is an expression of values of equality and solidarity which I argue is as relevant post-sixteen as pre-sixteen. England's college sector is vital but often misunderstood, and colleges are at the heart of their communities and economies, offering enormous potential for personal and social transformation and emancipation. I draw on my personal experience of working in comprehensive colleges to make the case for their key role within an education system which can contribute to human flourishing.

Keywords: selective mindset; comprehensive education; comprehensive college; National Education Service

Thinking small and thinking big

The American philosopher of education Maxine Greene in her brilliant collection *Releasing the Imagination* (Greene, 1995) wrote about the need to 'see small' as if from a distance – and also to 'see big' or close up (the terms 'small' and 'big' could be transposed in this context). Drawing on Thomas Mann's novel *Felix Krull*, Greene shows us how to see the world 'small' and systemically, looking at social trends and movements, and see it 'big', at the human scale, getting closer to the experiences and needs of particular individuals. Greene emphasises the usefulness of each and the need to be able to hold both perspectives in our sights at once and look at things 'as if they could be otherwise'.

Education can be thought of at both the 'big' and 'small' level, from both a personal and a social perspective. At the individual level, what we know and learn is key to our identity, part of a lifelong personal project of self-creation and self-knowledge. At the same time, education is also a social project based on our relationship with others and our need to work with others. We learn from others, with others and through others. Our own self-development matters little if it is disconnected from the wider world of other 'selves'. What we know and can do is expressed in relation to the social world, and becoming educated is as much to do with society as with our own personal motives.

When thinking about education we need to acknowledge both the 'big' and the 'small' view; we need to consider individuals and their needs as well as the requirements

 DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2021.63.1.07

for a vibrant wider community. The debate about what kind of schools, colleges or universities we should have – comprehensive or selective for instance – may seem to be purely about the system level but it also touches the personal level. In other words: what does the system actually mean for the experiences and opportunities available to me or my children? When making the case for a more comprehensive education system we are addressing both the personal and the social; thinking 'big' and 'small', and aiming for a convergence of self-interest and social interest.

The selective mindset

The selective mindset is deeply ingrained in many ideas about education. Its roots lie in people's assumptions about human nature, human potential, social class and the labour market amongst other factors. Its starting point is the belief that individuals can usefully be categorised using social constructs such as 'ability', 'aptitude', 'potential', 'educability' or 'intelligence'. When such shaky categories are quantified and recorded as test or exam scores, these metrics can then be used to justify selective practices, giving a veneer of objectivity to subjective judgements about learners.

Seen 'big', selection can be experienced as the opportunity to compete with others and 'get ahead'. For others, it means exclusion, rejection and failure, and being labelled as 'less able' or 'lacking ambition'. Seen 'small', selection shapes our view of ourselves, of each other and of society. Separating and segregating people can limit our horizons, restrict our notions of human potential and progress, and strengthen and reproduce existing social divisions and inequalities.

The comprehensive idea

In contrast, the comprehensive idea flows from our sense of equality and solidarity. It is both a social and organisational proposition as well as an individual one, and can be expressed through institutions such as the common school, college or university as well as through a set of personal values about learning together in a democratic society.

Seen 'big', it offers individuals the prospect of access to all the opportunities education can offer, in a form and at a time which works for them. Seen 'small', it requires us to build a system which can provide those opportunities for all, throughout society.

The comprehensive idea has a proud lineage, rooted in our attempts to define and create a more democratic society, exemplified by the American progressive tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Horace Mann (1796-1859) who campaigned for the common, non-sectarian, free, universal public school in nineteenth century Massachusetts. The philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) gave the commitment an egalitarian core: 'The democratic faith in human equality is belief that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of

their personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for the development of whatever gifts they have' (Dewey, 1939). Chicago-based social reformer Jane Addams (1860-1935) a friend of Dewey's, added: 'The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life' (Addams, 1892).

When we make the comprehensive case, we can do it on the basis of:

- Our fundamental beliefs, principles and values: it's the right thing to do to promote greater equality, democracy and social cohesion.
- The evidence about the performance and experience of students, social research and international comparisons: we know that while selective providers may achieve better raw results, like-for-like studies generally show that selection does not lead to better outcomes.
- Our own lived experience of working in comprehensive settings.

England's colleges: a vital and misunderstood sector

England's further education (FE) sector educates and trains over two million students and has a collective turnover of around £7 billion, including general FE colleges, sixth form colleges, specialist institutions and adult providers. The quality is overwhelmingly good, with 82 per cent of colleges judged good or outstanding at inspection.

Of college students, 740,000 are aged sixteen to eighteen, and for young people in this age group, colleges are the majority educational provider: over 60 per cent of all sixteen to eighteen-year-old students in England attend colleges. Colleges also offer 264,000 apprenticeships and are significant providers of higher education (HE), delivering the majority of foundation degrees and national diplomas, with a total of 137,000 HE students choosing to study at college rather than university.

Colleges are sometimes regarded as the awkward sector in the middle; neither school nor university, lacking a clear identity and struggling to be heard while other types of institution have greater political influence. But if we try to imagine an England without its colleges, the gaping hole in our social fabric could not be patched up by other types of provider. Something like a college would need to be invented. It is colleges' responsiveness and versatility which are their great strengths; they often do the vital work which others can't or won't do, and colleges are increasingly being seen as key to economic and social recovery and progress.

Colleges are rooted in their communities, adding value to their local area, working at the interface of education and the economy, connecting aspiration, progression, training and employment. They also help to create and nurture the web of social and economic relationships which can support local cohesion and collective resilience. The experience of 2020 has reminded us of the positive and protective role of public

services and the state itself, as well as the human value of different kinds of economic activity, and given us a more connected, global view of the consequences of our actions. England's colleges have been active in supporting people through the Covid-19 pandemic and they will have a vital role in helping us build back better, and fairer, after the economic fallout.

Colleges educating the 'disadvantaged'

If we look at where the most disadvantaged sixteen to eighteen-year-old students in England are studying, as defined by free school meal eligibility, we see that nearly three-quarters are in colleges. There are more than twice as many disadvantaged sixteen- to eighteen -year-old students studying in colleges as in schools, and in the two years for which there are data this proportion has increased from 71 per cent to 73 per cent, suggesting that the gap between schools and colleges is getting even wider. When one provider type is so much less representative, it is a sign of institutional differentiation by social class.

One symptom of this post-sixteen polarisation is the 'A level gap'. A level programmes have high entry requirements and open the door to 'high status' progression routes. Around a third of A level students in publicly funded provision are studying in colleges but if we look at the spread of A level students across institution types, they are unevenly distributed. A level students represent 80 per cent of the school sixth form final year cohort and 20 per cent of the college final year cohort. This means that school sixth forms are mostly opting out of providing the comprehensive offer needed to meet the needs of all young people.

The widening student achievement gap from the age of five to sixteen is well documented and it is colleges which do most of the heavy lifting in terms of narrowing that gap post-sixteen. For example, the overwhelming majority of all sixteen to eighteen students who had not achieved a grade 4 or above in GCSE English or maths at age sixteen are in colleges: 96 per cent and 92 per cent respectively. The subsequent success of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds in improving their English and maths is almost entirely down to the work colleges do to re-engage and re-motivate students who have struggled at school.

Colleges which aim to provide for the educational needs of the full sixteen to nineteen age cohort may not always be at the top of performance tables, but they can be aspirational and successful learning communities. Despite the greater A level numbers in schools, more disadvantaged students progress to university from colleges than from schools.

The average college's sixteen to eighteen numbers have risen to around 2500 students whereas school sixth forms have an average size of less than 200 students,

and 57 per cent of all school sixth forms do not meet the government's own viability threshold of 200 students to justify a new sixth form. Public policy for nearly a decade has encouraged the creation of new school sixth forms, mostly offering A levels. More providers offering the same few courses often means less choice overall. We know that having many small providers in a locality can lead to a narrowing of the course offer available to local students. For example, if you live in an area where A level provision is mainly to be found in small sixth forms, you are likely to have fewer opportunities to access the subjects you want. The proliferation of small sixth forms has happened at a time of significant cuts in public funding, making such provision even less cost-effective. At the same time, colleges have been encouraged to rationalise their provision and their final year A level cohorts are on average over three times larger than those in schools.

Different students, different courses, different providers

Selective, separatist thinking seems to be more acceptable post-sixteen. Somehow, the fact that the post-sixteen curriculum is more specialised and that students' needs are more diverse at this stage seems to prompt a greater desire to separate students into different providers. The argument is that selection simply sorts and groups students by their interests, allowing a better focus on their different needs. But it is the very diversity of students, of curricula and of needs which makes the case for offering everything within a common college. In effect a college can be an art school, a business school, a science and engineering academy, a liberal studies sixth form, a retake college and a special needs provider all under one roof, with no incentive to push students into any route other that what is best for them.

Last year's Augar review into post-eighteen education (Augar, 2019) described colleges as having 'become providers of everything to everyone' with 'an extremely broad focus, with no single defining purpose and with no consistent identity nationally'. Is this breadth and range a weakness or a strength? Is segregation – whether by prior achievement, by educational needs – the answer? Why is it so important to segregate people where they study if they are going to live and work together?

Proponents of selection at sixteen will argue that by then we know who the 'academic' students are, and they will do better if they are with other students like them. This kind of deterministic labelling only holds students back, denying them the possibility of growth or change. There is no evidence that equally qualified students do any better in a selective setting.

Another argument is that 'structures don't matter' and all that counts is good teachers and good schools. This fails to recognise the social setting and the signals being sent by the existing structures about the value of people and provision. By placing

institutional walls between students, for whatever reason, we set limits on opportunities for achievement and social cohesion, and we risk reproducing existing patterns of success and failure.

Some will claim that universal 'full-spectrum' provision is just too confusing for everyone and advocate enforced institutional specialisation and selection to simplify the landscape. For example, the EDSK report *Further Consideration* (Richmond and Bailey, 2020) argues that 'bundling every student and course under the single banner of a college' does not deliver clarity and is 'likely to confuse learners, parents and politicians alike … preventing colleges from acquiring a distinct identity'. The report goes on to suggest a new tripartism with colleges broken up into three types of separate institutions each with a different brand and identity, strictly ring-fenced to create 'a clear separation of duties as well as greater clarity for learners and employers'.

The three college types would be community colleges for basic skills and community learning provision, sixth form colleges for A levels and classroom-based level 2 and 3 courses, and technology colleges for vocational and technical training (including apprenticeships) up to level 4/5. These different institutions would support 'learners with different profiles'. To further 'promote clarity', colleges that wish to offer A levels should be required to convert their academic sixteen to nineteen provision into a sixth form college, and schools and sixth form colleges should be prohibited from offering the new T levels. These proposals would amount to an enforced tripartism and echo previous institutional hierarchies unsuited to the needs of the twenty-first century.

Colleges are key institutions in the emancipation of working-class, black, Asian and minority ethnic students as well as for broader community development. They work with the most disadvantaged; the very people who are being disproportionately hit by the economic and health crises. Colleges' success with marginalised, excluded and disadvantaged students and their efficiencies of scale are genuine strengths. But this is not an argument for greater selection and segregation of learners. We know from experience that colleges can do the full range of their work extremely well, and that their various strengths can be included and safeguarded within a broad comprehensive mission.

By providing a rationale for turning people away, a selective provider feeds people's wish to get into somewhere which might reject them. This defines aspiration in competitive terms; you must beat someone else to get that place, and where you get in becomes more important than what you might achieve. Selection changes us, it shapes our view of ourselves and each other and our model of human potential and human progress. In contrast, comprehensive institutions can reflect the full profile of the age group and concentrate on meeting everyone's needs, rather than on positioning themselves to defeat their opponents in a competitive market.

A comprehensive curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

The selective mindset also reaches deep into our ideas about the curriculum and how it is taught and assessed. England is being driven towards a more binary model based on two main routes: 'academic' leading mainly to HE, and 'technical' leading mainly to employment. The current reform of qualifications taking place in England is the latest manifestation of this (Department for Education, 2020). Requiring people to make this choice does not do justice to the diversity of people's aspirations and journeys, and it risks locking them into specialised routes with few opportunities to move sideways or broaden their range. This could leave students on both routes ill-equipped for either the labour market or citizenship, and it is astonishing how little general or civic education is expected in English post-sixteen programmes compared to those of other countries.

A comprehensive system needs a comprehensive vision of the curriculum. There is a lack of any core curriculum entitlement common to all young people in compulsory education, just at the point in their lives where they are becoming full citizens and developing their sense of social purpose and agency. We need a curriculum for global citizenship and personal growth which helps students develop their social, cultural, political, economic and psychological literacies. Rather than telling some young people at sixteen that they are not 'academic' and others that they are not 'technical', we could be developing a single overarching national diploma framework which could keep more learning routes and possibilities open to everyone.

Living our comprehensive values: a personal experience

For me, this is personal. I have worked in education for over thirty-five years, spending twenty-two of those as a principal or senior leader in colleges in Leicester, Tower Hamlets and Newham in East London. All my experience has been in diverse urban settings with high levels of disadvantage where we have tried to put the comprehensive idea into practice. As an elected councillor and chair of education committee in my home borough of Waltham Forest in North East London in the 1980s, I was also closely involved in the creation of two new colleges as part of a reorganisation of secondary education. I could add as a parent that my four children all attended comprehensive schools and colleges.

Take the case of Newham Sixth Form College (NewVIc), the college I led from 2008 to 2018 as an example. NewVIc opened in 1992, having been created by a local authority committed to raising post-sixteen participation, achievement and progression in Newham where these were historically low. This reorganisation required the closure of most of the school sixth forms, a brave and controversial move. There was no question

of creating a selective sixth form to serve only the highest achieving students.

From the start, it was clear that, like other similar projects elsewhere, the experiment was working. Participation, achievement and progression have all soared in Newham since NewVIc opened. The new college was tasked with providing for the educational needs of the full sixteen to nineteen age cohort, and it has been a successful and ambitious learning community by any standard. For example, the number of 'disadvantaged' students progressing to university is regularly the highest in the country, with many students progressing to 'high tariff' universities every year, and large numbers of students who left school with low GCSE grades also making it to university after three or four years of further education. These are students who wouldn't even get a look-in at many selective school sixth forms and would have been written off as 'no-hopers'.

Despite its success, this comprehensive model is under threat. In 1992 there were three sixth forms in Newham – catering for all young people's educational needs. In recent years there has been a proliferation of selective sixth forms in the area, with at least ten across the borough now. This has created a de facto selective system, albeit without the public debate which preceded previous reorganisations. Is it possible to remain a comprehensive provider when you are surrounded by several highly selective providers? The existence of even a single provider selecting students on the basis of higher prior achievement inevitably changes the environment for all the other local providers, and effectively undermines the comprehensiveness of the local system. But even if the context has changed, a college does not have to give up on its aspiration to serve the whole age cohort. There is no reason to stop aiming to be comprehensive, even if it is more difficult.

Throughout my professional life, the selective mindset and the comprehensive idea have been in constant tension, both in public policy and in people's beliefs, attitudes and expectations. I have often come up against the self-limiting beliefs of students and their families. These don't stem from a lack of 'aspiration' but reflect wider assumptions about people's abilities. For example, when the number of selective local sixth forms started to increase around us in the 2010s, we started to hear more high achieving and ambitious students who had never experienced a sense of failure describing themselves as 'not good enough' or 'too thick' to get into a 'good' college because they've been rejected by a highly selective provider. This is not how we want to talk about aspiration and it's not the language of a comprehensive system, and we cannot afford to institutionalise the waste and divisiveness this represents.

The comprehensive idea is still alive in the college sector. But it survives despite the policy environment, the qualification system and the education market, which all encourage sorting and ranking of institutions and the creation of hierarchies of students and programmes.

Colleges as part of a system

Schools serve neighbourhoods and universities have a broad civic purpose. Colleges are always rooted in a community and often have both a local and regional focus as well as an educational and an economic role. We need to move on from the market model and start to think more systemically and find ways to incentivise all post-sixteen education providers to work together. We need an approach to all sixteen to eighteen provision that encourages the kind of co-ordination and collaboration which can ensure that whatever funding there is benefits students and protects the educational offer. Initiatives like the centres for excellence in maths, the strategic college improvement fund and its successor college collaboration fund have helped to support partnership work and sharing of good practice, at least within our sector.

In 2020, the England-specific report of the Independent Commission for the College of the Future recommended the introduction of a legal duty on colleges to establish networks across appropriate economic geographies, matched by a duty on all other post-sixteen education providers in the economic geography to collaborate in the interests of students, communities and the economy. This would help to 'hard-wire' collaboration and establish a system, where there is currently only a market.

From the Labour Party we have the idea of a National Education Service (NES) – an excellent organising principle which still needs to be fleshed out with concrete examples of how it would broaden opportunity. I have written elsewhere about the promise of a National Education Service and how it could be better defined and expressed (Playfair, 2018). The idea can be a vote winner and has the potential to transform educational opportunity by giving education its 'NHS moment'. An NES could help give purpose and coherence to our ramshackle market of overlapping and competing institutions. It needs to be grounded in our shared values and to grow from a broad debate about what we want from education.

Within an overall NES, we would need an inclusive and comprehensive sixteen to eighteen education system which aims to challenge disadvantage and narrow achievement gaps. We also need a renaissance in adult education, to promote employment, health, personal development and community engagement. The comprehensive college is well placed to meet both these needs and to respond in ways which are driven by the aspirations of the people who live in its locality.

Conclusion

We are living in a time of crisis, fracture and growing inequality. Sorting, channelling, separating and segregating students will tend to limit opportunities and reproduce existing inequalities. If we want to address the many challenges which face us – economic, social, democratic and environmental; inequality, injustice, violence and

prejudice – we will need a modern, universal, public education system which is fit for purpose and which can foster a democratic culture in which everyone can have a stake, flourish and 'find their genius'. At the heart of such a system there will need to be a thriving college sector; locally rooted, responsive, innovative, creative, ambitious, inclusive and, of course, comprehensive.

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