

# Going forward comprehensively

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## **Abstract**

Fleshing out the definition of comprehensive education to include vital issues related to the act of teaching, this article considers reforms to be undertaken by practitioners alongside the political legislation required to achieve a fully comprehensive system of secondary schools. The effects of selection, such as the widening attainment gap, the impact of external testing and the culture of testing, together with the growth of setting and streaming are considered. There is a further examination of the relationship between the learner and the teacher, and the deeply influential results of segregation on children's self-image and readiness to learn. Finland is offered as a model of freedom from testing and successful, wholly non-competitive, mixed-ability teaching.

**Keywords:** comprehensive education; primary schools; educational selection; mixed-ability teaching; equal opportunities

## **Need for a fresh eye**

Ninety-six per cent of schools in England and Wales are comprehensives. Only 163 grammar schools remain as relics of an outdated system, but this is not to say that 96 per cent of children are educated in classes which are genuinely mixed ability. Selectivity remains and, despite public opinion, even expands. For too long 'comprehensive' has been taken to denote the mixed-ability character of the entry to secondary schools. There is much more to it and it is time to take a fresh look. Selectivity is often hidden in plain sight.

It is high time that an observant eye was turned on the present situation and how we might create fairer teaching and learning, open to all regardless of the circumstances of birth and upbringing. We must consider whether schools are actively widening the attainment gap through their current practice.

## **Selectivity is expanding**

Few can doubt that selection is inhibiting the attainment of the children who are most in need because it often entails the segregation of those who lack advantages in their background. The result is that early failure is reinforced. As things are, more than two million are failing, despite additional funding in the form of the pupil premium targeted specifically at the disadvantaged. There has been only a small improvement over the years and this has been reversed recently.

The gap in attainments is all too clear by the age of three and has increased by the time the children enter school. The gap widens further in primary school and has doubled to 9.5 months by the age of eleven. In fact, the gap doubles at every organisational stage and by the end of secondary school is 19.3 months.

## **Both government and schools should act**

Improvement in equal opportunities should be considered in two main ways. Actions which could be undertaken by government, and actions which could be taken by the parents and teachers of children currently being educated within the existing system. The former is in the hands of politicians and we must continue to press them for much-needed change.

First, and of the greatest importance, should be the restoration of children's centres. Fully comprehensive and involving parents and carers, they would go far towards ending early disadvantage, particularly with regard to the spoken word so vital to the later development of literacy. The centres would be an integral part of a national system of nursery schools funded by government through local authorities. Such an emphasis upon the early years would require a major shift in political priorities. The nursery sector has been neglected and 25 per cent of nurseries have been closed over the last ten years while successive governments have focused on children of statutory school age, and more specifically on the secondary stage. There has to be a wholehearted recognition of the value of early and primary education in determining the success of the education system as a whole. Stefan Collini, professor emeritus at the University of Cambridge, encapsulated the magnitude of the change in political attitudes which is required. He wrote:

The truth is that if you say you want more children from deprived areas to be able to go to university, then don't faff around with entry tariffs; invest in Sure Start centres, preschool groups, subsidised childcare and properly resourced primary schools. Make benefits genuinely accessible and life-supporting. (*Guardian*, 1 September, 2020)

There could hardly be a more definitive affirmation of the vital importance of early and primary education – and it must be noted that these organisational stages are completely comprehensive in nature. It is later in the education system that the shades of the selective prison house close in until there is a concentration on young people who are likely to succeed in examinations at the ages of sixteen and eighteen.

## **Tripartite system creates failure**

Comparison with the obsolete tripartite organisational system shows that the success of comprehensive secondary schools is beyond question: they have achieved higher levels

of staying-on, higher attainments and university entrance and performance. Above all, every child is free from the stain of failure which confronts between two-thirds and three-quarters of the children who do not pass the 11+. It is significant that most adults who were identified as failures at the age of eleven find it difficult to dismiss this from their mind and they seem impelled to tell others about it in later life. Early failure has a powerfully negative effect upon learning and life. In addition the harmful effects on secondary modern schools stemming from the presence of a grammar school are well documented. The attainments of the whole community are lowered. For evidence we need look no further than the county of Kent. Confirmation is provided by the Social Mobility Commission's report (2010) which affirmed that: 'Areas with a higher proportion of grammar schools and segregated schools have the largest educational achievement gaps'.

The remaining grammar school rump has another adverse effect upon primary education. The distorted curriculum and the concentration on preparation for the 11+ are accompanied by widespread private coaching out of school hours. Hence selection is related to family income, the school community is divided and the unfairness of 11+ selection is magnified even further. Furthermore, it is shown by research that selection tests are inaccurate and cannot predict with sufficient accuracy which children are likely to gain from an academically focused education. Research indicates that a third of those selected could be exchanged for the non-selected below the 11+ pass mark without any effect on the grammar school profile of ability.

Government policy over many years has acknowledged long-established public opinion which is strongly in favour of comprehensive schools. For this reason political extremists have made only limited attempts to expand existing grammar schools and to allocate finance facilitating the creation of additional places earmarked for disadvantaged children. The major task of completing the work prompted by government Circular 10/66 still awaits political action, which is doubtless inhibited by the understandable loyalty and support enjoyed by the few grammar schools which remain. The teachers and the families of children who have survived the unfair lottery of 11+ selection are well aware that they are in a privileged position and they will fight for the continued existence of their schools.

## **Evolutionary reform of grammar schools**

Decisive action must be taken by a government confident of public support; the restructuring of secondary education should wait no longer. The opposition mustered by the self-interested should be met by the adoption of an evolutionary programme of change in the function of grammar schools. An abrupt change in function would risk losing traditional expertise, and it is important that slower evolutionary change should

cushion consequent changes to staffing and resources. The grammar schools should be invited to occupy a worthwhile place in the comprehensive eleven to eighteen system. They would evolve into selective sixth form colleges over a period of five years. Existing pupils would retain their places but 11+ selection would be ended and there would be no further admissions into year seven.

It could be argued that the proposal simply postpones selection for five years. This is true but it is emphasised that selection at the age of sixteen-plus is a totally different matter when compared with 11+ selection. The younger the selection, the more inaccurate and damaging it becomes. By the later age the choice between academic and vocational courses is much more the preference of the student and the family. The newly evolved grammar sixth-form colleges would be an integral element within a range of options, and selection could well be by choice rather than testing.

### **Impact on primary schools**

Government action has a major distorting impact on the quality of primary education through the frequency of high-stakes national testing of basic skills. The results are considered, however wrongly, an indicator of overall school performance. Poor results can lead to sanctions, and the inevitable outcome has been a harmful narrowing of the curriculum and a concentration on whole-class coaching for the tests. This is the political imposition of elementary education; reading, writing and arithmetic, and little time given to the wider aspects of the curriculum. The considerable impact on the life and work of primary schools, deriving from the limited view of their purpose as mere preparation for the later stage, has damaged the comprehensive nature of the entire education system.

Central to the definition of comprehensive education is the principle that teaching should focus on meeting the individual needs of pupils. The political assumption which lies beneath national testing is contrary to that – it is assumed that there is an expected level which all children in a given year are expected to attain. It will require bold political action to change the current culture so assiduously propagated by political policy statements and adopt the evaluation of individual progress. An initial and most important step forward would be the moderation of raw scores in national testing by month of birth. This will be an overdue and real move towards the necessary recognition of the individuality of each child.

### **Focusing on the individual**

It is needless to add that a substantial reduction in external testing should follow and be replaced by a greater reliance upon school records and teacher assessments. Politicians are attracted to testing because the results can be quantified. But the accuracy signified

by a number is false: research has shown that scores are not consistent and are seriously affected by personal circumstances. Human beings are complex creatures and the testing system presumes far more accuracy than is merited.

In seeking sounder assessments we should turn to the partnership of parents and teachers; both are concerned with the children's upbringing and they spend much time with them. They have unrivalled access to the evidence of children's growth in understanding and skills in the home and the school. No one and no system is better placed to appraise progress which is formative of new learning rather than the flawed summative measure provided by external testing. Those who point to research which has indicated that teacher assessments are inaccurate must be reminded that the alleged inaccuracy stems from the validation of such assessments through comparison with examination results. Assessment is for children – not for forecasting the results of testing. Primary schools must be free to put children first and the tests second, and in this way the true achievement of comprehensive primary education will be realised.

### **Selectivity of sets and streams**

So much for the political actions which are necessary for reform. However, primary practitioners must consider how far the organisation of their classes and learning groups is contributing to the perpetuation of selection in powerful ways. The setting and streaming of primary children are widespread. Following the government's introduction of the testing of phonic knowledge at the age of eight this is even found in infant schools and classes, and comparative studies have shown that setting and streaming are more prevalent in the UK than in other developed countries. This contributes to the wide spread of attainment among young people at the conclusion of formal education. Differences in educational attainment related to early development are exacerbated by streamed schooling, and continue to widen through adolescence and beyond.

It is argued that selection for a stream can be provisional depending on their progress, and that children can be switched between streams at a later stage. However, this rarely happens. Research shows that once segregated learning groups are formed there is little movement between the groups.

Selection for ability streams is deeply problematical and the younger the child the more it becomes so. Children born in the spring or the summer, boys and the disadvantaged by accident of birth are vulnerable to allocation to learning groups where early lack of progress is hardened into long-term failure. Too often streaming selects children out of educational opportunity. Children's past should not predetermine their future.

True comprehensive education should take into account aspects of personal development such as the children's level of confidence and enterprise. In addition, learning how to learn is vitally important in primary schools, and it is in this respect

that segregated sets and classes have their most damaging impact. Children who find it difficult to learn are taught by teachers who may well have the best intentions but who, nevertheless, adjust the challenge presented to the children. Conscientious teachers modify the language used in communicating with segregated 'slow-learners' but this shapes responses, and the outcome is too often reduced expectations of success. There is regression to the mean and, in the course of time, a conditioning to become more like the stereotype of the set or stream in which the children are placed. If the comprehensive nature of the primary school is to be honoured, then internal selection for streaming must be ended.

Standards of achievement would rise rather than fall. Research shows that while only marginal gains have been found for children of exceptional ability in streamed classes there are adverse effects upon the progress of most children in the lower streams, not least in terms of their self-image and motivation to learn. The longer-term benefits of natural, mixed-ability groups should not be sacrificed to short-term gain in test results. Heads and teachers must resist political pressure and implement much needed change. The aim must be to keep opportunities to learn open to all children throughout the primary years and into secondary school.

We must be equally cautious about sets which are often organised for mathematics teaching and for preparation for national tests. Hard-pressed teachers will often lessen their task of meeting individual needs by creating small groups of similar attainment and need within the mixed-ability class. Once again there is little or no transfer between sets once the initial allocation is made. The impact on the self-esteem and attitudes towards learning on the part of children in the lower sets is considerable. This can be masked by enterprising teaching and a well-matched programme of work, but the long-term adverse effects are real and become evident in subsequent years.

It is stressed that the segregated groups should not be allowed to become a permanent feature but that opportunities should be found, perhaps at the beginning of a new topic, to tackle learning as a class of individuals free from former assumptions about apparent levels of learning. It is at this point that the teacher must call upon his or her professionalism. Segregation shapes our thinking about the segregated and we must take great care that we look at the children professionally. We must guard against bias, perhaps unconscious but nevertheless real, which colours our relationship with the children and even the language we use when communicating with them. Many of us have found that given a new arena for teaching outside the classroom, perhaps on an educational visit, different children emerge as pacesetters and the hierarchy established in our biased minds is overturned. It cannot be over-stressed how important it is for all children in the comprehensive school not to be barred from learning; full opportunities must remain open.

It has been estimated that the school a child attends makes a difference of between 10 per cent and 20 per cent in academic results. While this may be merely a product of how

far schools concentrate on the achievement of test results, it is nonetheless important to consider the differences which exist in the act of teaching, and consequently, learning. These vary from school to school and teacher to teacher. Is there a focus on preparing for external testing or is there a determined focus on learning – the two are not synonymous. Coaching for examination success often leads to ephemeral results; short-term recall is not embedded in the children's lives and learning and is too often forgotten some weeks later. The meeting of individual needs and the spurring of individual motivation are central to comprehensive education.

### **The culture of testing**

The political insistence that frequent testing is necessary to monitor school performance has had a major impact on the interactions between adult and pupil which we summarise as teaching. Testing becomes an essential part of most conversations with the children. Open-ended questions addressed to the whole class are rare, and the ubiquitous close-ended questioning which seeks only one correct answer is nothing more than a test. The children either know the correct answer or they don't. The word of praise or gold star which the successful answer brings from the teacher does little to help the rest of the class to learn. Children are by nature self-absorbed and are unlikely to learn from the answers of others. Similarly, worksheets are usually tests and all too seldom help the children forward towards new learning.

### **Comprehensive primary practice**

A concentration on the best of traditional primary practice would best realise the comprehensive ideal. Learning which is deeply imbedded in the child's person, and which will stay with that child through adolescence and beyond, is best acquired through direct personal experience. Understanding is drawn from the experience and held in the mind – as thread can be drawn from cloth. The teacher's interactions with the child and, in particular, their joint use of language facilitates the growth of understanding and stimulates further experience. This is as true of the educational visit to the farm as it is true of the five-year-old learning to multiply through the manipulation of wooden blocks. The teaching of skills (always based on understanding) is most effective when the necessary instruction and example is provided by the teacher working one to one with the child.

Children learn most soundly when the outcomes, whether knowledge or skills, have relevance to the realities of their lives. This is the context which puts children first and is so much more productive than the rote learning of the teacher's or the textbook's abstractions. And this, the best of primary teaching and learning freed from external pressure, taken together with the completed reform of secondary schools, will go far towards the achievement of a fully comprehensive school system.



## Finland – a successful model

If and when there is a need to answer those who, in denial of the evidence provided by research and practice, still cling to the old-fashioned status quo, we should turn to the example provided by Finland. It was in 1968 that Finland began the evolution into a successful modern state founded on a comprehensive education system for all children aged between seven and sixteen. Now the attainments and the wellbeing of Finland's children are widely recognised and the envy of the developed world. Not only is there no selection at any stage but there is no external testing until the one test at the age of sixteen. The professionalism of teachers is respected and they are trusted to assess their pupils' progress. Throughout, there is no competition, rankings or comparisons, and streaming has been abolished.

There could not be a better model for us to follow. We should go forward without hesitation.

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