

AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?: COMPREHENSIVE PRINCIPLES AND THE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY IN BRITISH EDUCATION

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Introduction

The expansion of state education in Britain throughout the twentieth century has always been supported by a compelling argument about the role of mass education in a modern industrial democracy. According to this argument, the economic results of industrialisation have made it possible to extend to all children the kind of educational opportunities previously reserved for the few. This argument is reinforced by the belief that educational reforms based on the principle of 'equality of educational opportunity' would have both social and economic benefits. Socially, such reforms would help to eradicate elitism and class privilege and promote greater social justice. Economically, equalising the opportunities available to pupils from different social classes would ensure that the education system could respond more effectively to the demands of the labour market for a more widespread provision of high quality education. Thus, by adopting the doctrine of 'equality of educational opportunity', as the official ideology of state education, the egalitarian aim of promoting greater social justice and the economic aim of producing the appropriate workforce for a modern industrial economy could be reconciled (Jones, 1983).

It was this doctrine of 'equality of educational opportunity' which inspired the attempts to reform British secondary education in accordance with comprehensive principles in the 1960s and 1970s. The purpose of this paper is to explain how and why the comprehensive principles

became the central organising principle of secondary education in Britain, to describe how the principle was translated into practice to evaluate the extent of its success and to account for its limitations and failures.

The Background to Comprehensive Reforms 1944-1965

The comprehensive principle —the principle of single, non-selective schools offering a common educational experience to all pupils— has long been debated in Britain. Although the principle originated in socialist thinking, it has been supported by all those opposed to the basic inegalitarian tendencies endemic to British society. Thus, the aim of the Education Act, introduced by a Conservative Government in 1944, was to provide a secondary education for all pupils which would put an end to the evils and inequities which were characteristic of the highly selective and divisive schools of the pre-war period.

Although the 1944 Act defined all schools for pupils from the age of eleven as 'secondary', it nevertheless provided a 'tripartite' system of secondary education based on three different institutions —secondary grammar schools, secondary technical schools and secondary modern schools— each with its own distinctive curriculum. Thus 'grammar schools' retained the kind of 'academic' curriculum associated with the classical ideal of «the cultivated man». Technical schools had a more vocationally orientated curriculum while modern schools offered a curriculum deemed appropriate for the 'non-academic' pupils.

In principle, these three types of secondary school were of equal status and the process of allocating pupils to them was to be based solely on their «age, aptitude and ability». The selection procedures employed to make such decisions were to make use of 'intelligence tests' which were to be taken by all eleven year old children and which would provide an objective measure of each child's inherent intellectual ability. Armed with this 'objective' information, the educational authorities would be able to make accurate decisions about what kind of secondary school each child should attend.

In the early 1950's, however, intelligence testing began to lose credibility for a number of reasons. In the first place, it became clear that a large number of pupils who, according to the intelligence test, were deemed to be 'non-academic' (and thus consigned to secondary modern schools) were actually achieving high levels of academic success in public examinations. Conversely, a significant proportion of pupils who, on the basis of intelligence tests, were selected for grammar schools, consistently failed to benefit from an academic education.

Second, the validity of intelligence tests was severely undermined by numerous sociological surveys which brought to light the extent to which the selection procedures reflected differences in the social class background of pupils rather than differences in their innate intelligence. Thus, the pupil population of secondary modern schools was predominantly working class while grammar schools, which were supposedly for academically able children from all social classes were, in fact, populated predominantly by children with professional and middle class parents (Jackson and Marsden, 1962).

Finally, in 1957, a committee of the British Psychological Society severely criticized the intellectual basis of Intelligence tests and pronounced that it was not possible to predict the educational potential of pupils by measuring their intelligence at the age of eleven. In the view of the committee, 'intellectual ability' was not static and fixed but rather develops and expands through the educational process. The results of Intelligence tests thus always reflect pupils previous educational experience rather than simple measure their innate intellectual endowments (Vernon, 1957).

By the end of the 1950s the 'objectivity' of intelligence tests could no longer be seriously defended and its legitimacy as a basis for system of secondary education based on selection began to crumble. As a result, the movement to do away with selection and segregation and to reorganise the secondary education in accordance with comprehensive principles began to gather force. In 1964, a Labour Government was elected which was committed to establishing a non-selective comprehensive system of education which would provide equality of educational opportunity for all classes.

The Introduction of Comprehensive Reforms 1964-1979

The comprehensive reorganisation of secondary education had been Labour Party policy since 1955. In July 1965, just nine months after the Labour Government had been elected, the Department of Education and Science (D.E.S.) set this policy in motion by issuing its famous circular 10/65 inviting all Local Education Authorities (L.E.A.s) to submit plans for reorganising secondary education on comprehensive lines. However, although Circular 10/65 claimed to laying down national policy for secondary education it did not have any legal force and therefore was not mandatory. The government strategy was to achieve comprehensive reforms by approving reorganisation plans devised by the LEAs rather than through central prescription and control. However, the failure to

write the comprehensive principle into the law and to coordinate its implementation from the centre, meant that the success of the policy was entirely dependent on co-operation from LEAs. Where this co-operation was lacking, where for example, LEAs either submitted reorganisation plans which retained selection or did not submit any plans at all, there was very little that the government could do.

But despite these difficulties, the impact of Circular 10/65 was immense and it stimulated a large number of LEAs from all areas of the country to produce and implement comprehensive reform. However, by the early 1970s it was becoming clear that though many LEAs had introduced a comprehensive system of secondary education, the reforms could not be completed unless positive steps were taken in law to secure this end (Benn and Simon, 1972). In February 1970, the Labour Government introduced legislation which would abolish selection and compel LEAs to reorganise secondary education on comprehensive lines. But in June 1970, before the legislation could be approved, a Conservative Government was elected which, as its first act, withdrew Circular 10/65 and replaced it by a Circular allowing LEAs to organise secondary education as they so wished. In 1974, a Labour Government was again elected and, in 1976, finally made the comprehensive reform of secondary educational legally enforceable.

By the end of the 1970s it was clear that, though the process of comprehensive reform had been in operation for over a decade, it was having only a limited success. For example, although comprehensive reforms promised to increase the educational opportunities of working class pupils, in reality the expansions in opportunities that were created—particularly the opportunity to enter higher education—were primarily taken by the children of professional and middle class parents. Similarly, although it was self-evident that comprehensive education could only operate successfully if it became a universal system of secondary education, it was never totally adopted. In 1978, 70 out of 104 LEAs still retained forms of secondary education based on selective principles (Hopkins, 1978).

Also, within the comprehensive schools that had been established since 1965, selective principles were still applied. A survey conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) in 1978 estimated that only 2% of comprehensive schools were completely unstreamed and that the segregation of pupils according to their ability remained the normal practice in the great majority of schools (DES, 1978). Despite the fact that the old tripartite system of 'grammar', 'technical' and 'modern' schools had largely been replaced by a comprehensive system, it was

clear that the internal organisation of comprehensive schools was rarely determined by the comprehensive principle.

Against the background of these failures to successfully translate comprehensive principles into practice, it is hardly surprising that the values and assumptions informing official educational policy began to be questioned. Also, by the mid 1970s the educational debate increasingly reflected the decline in the British economy, the rise in unemployment, the massive rise in inflation and unprecedented industrial unrest. In this context, the tone of educational debate was transformed and the principle of equality of educational opportunity as the central organising principle of official educational policy began to lose credibility.

With hindsight, it is now clear that the gradual erosion and eventual displacement of the comprehensive principle was the result of two factors. The first was a realisation amongst educational policy makers that there was no necessary connection between increasing educational opportunities and improving economic effectiveness. Because of this, the emphasis in educational policy was gradually switched from the egalitarian principle of equality to the vocational principle of preparation for the world of work.

The second factor was a growing disillusionment amongst the general public with the practical results of comprehensive reforms. This disillusionment was articulated in a series of 'Black Papers on Education' written by a group of right wing educational ideologists between 1966 and 1977 (Cox and Dyson, 1971). In the main the 'Black Paper' consisted of polemical attacks on recent educational developments in general and comprehensive reforms in particular. According to the 'Black Paper' writers, comprehensive reorganisation had led to a decline in educational standards and prevented schools from effectively pursuing the traditional aim of 'academic excellence'—failures that could only be rectified by reestablishing the old 'grammar schools' and re-asserting the validity of traditional methods of streaming and selection.

Although they were rarely substantiated by research evidence, the arguments of the Black Papers clearly reflected a good deal of public opinion and prepared the ground for the resurgence of educational views which previously been regarded as outmoded. By the end of the 1970s these views—about the adverse educational effects of 'equality', about the need to maintain 'standards', and about the need to preserve 'excellence'—had been brought back into common currency. In consequence, the consensus of opinion favourable to comprehensive principles began to disintegrate.

The particular event that provided a watershed in the demise of the comprehensive principle was the speech made at Ruskin College in 1976

by the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan. In this, Callaghan gave notice that the egalitarian social principles that had dominated educational policy would have to be tempered by the need for schools to become more responsive to the economic needs of society in general and the labour requirements of industry in particular. Callaghan, therefore, launched a 'Great Debate' aimed at reappraising all aspects of the current education system, including the issues identified by the 'Black Papers'.

Thus, by the end of the 1970s, the egalitarian principles which formed the rationale for the comprehensive reforms of the previous fifteen years were in retreat. In 1979, the Labour government suffered a landslide electoral defeat and 'Thatcherism', with its 'free-market' economic ideology and its 'laissez-faire' social philosophy had arrived.

The Decline and Fall of the Comprehensive Ideal 1979-1990

With the return of a Conservative Government in 1979 the stage was set for a reconstruction of education according to principles antithetical to the egalitarianism of comprehensive education. Although the new Government was committed to dismantling the reforms of the post war era, it proceeded cautiously and the decade which followed saw the gradual erosion rather than the sudden excision of the comprehensive ideal. The Education Act of 1980 introduced several changes which though small clearly heralded a new dawn in education policy. The private sector was strengthened by the Assisted Places Scheme which potentially allowed thousands of pupils a year to be 'creamed off' from the state sector. Other measures helped to lay the basis for a market oriented state education system —the requirements that schools should publish their exam results; and that parents be given the right of appeal against the school to which their child had been allocated by the Local Education Authority and the right to send their children to a school of their choice outside the LEA.

The pace of radical change was quickening by the middle of the decade when it was evident that Government policies based on free market economics, cuts in public expenditure and the diminution of trade union power seemed to have produced a healthier economy. Developments in this period were characterized by two dominant if apparently contradictory tendencies: the move towards increased centralization at the expense of the 'partnership' between LEAs, teachers and the state; and the move towards greater differentiation, selectivity and 'choice' in pursuit of the twin goals of opening up education to market

forces and supplying the man and womanpower needs of a restructured economy.

Under the partnership model of the post-war period, successive governments had relied on a strategy of extensive negotiation and consultation to implement its educational policy. All this gradually changed as the State became more interventionist and less hesitant about seeking to control the curriculum and restrict the autonomy of teachers and LEAs. Two White Papers - *Better Schools* and *Teaching Quality* (1983-5) provided a framework for curriculum renewal and HMI produced a number of curriculum policy documents. The framework set up in the mid 1980s (Bennett, 1984) gave LEAs a much more significant rôle as local representatives of the national state, but later initiatives aimed to circumvent their power. Other measures were aimed at making teachers more accountable, and reducing their control of the curriculum. For example, the teacher dominated Schools Council, established in 1964 as an important curriculum development agency, was abolished in 1984.

As well as these moves towards centralization, a framework was being created which fostered the principle of selectivity and hastened the development of a market-led education system. The rhetoric of differentiation both within and between schools to cater for individual abilities and interests was deployed to 'raise standards' and to establish criteria to facilitate parental choice. Major centrally funded initiatives like LAPP (Low Attaining Pupils Programme) and TVEI (Technical and Vocational Education Initiative), were essentially designed for a segment of the 'ability' range and to further the process of differentiation within schools. Likewise, the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), widely regarded as a 'progressive' reform in that it provided a common examination for all pupils at 16+, in practice, as Radnor (1987) point out, meant that judgements were made by teachers about which pupils were suitable for which courses, sometimes as early as 14. Different 'paths' were involved and certain path ruled out the possibility of higher grades.

The 'new' principles were also reflected in the amount of private purchase of services which were previously free in State schools (Pring, 1986). Parents and commercial establishments have been asked to donate money not only for extra curricular provision but even for basic essentials like books, equipment and building repairs. There has also been an increase in the use of monies from public sources to buy education in private institutions, e.g. the Assisted Places Scheme referred to earlier. Voucher schemes have also been considered, the ultimate form of an education system responsive to market forces, enabling parents to act as 'consumers' and to 'shop around'. Various experiments were

carried out but the voucher proposal was eventually discarded partly because of the practical difficulties of administering such a system, partly because it was too flagrant a violation of social justice and equality (even members of the Conservative Government recognized that it would advantage the wealthy who would not have to pay the full cost of independent schooling out of their own pockets) and partly because the Education Reform Act (1988) introduced the principles behind vouchers in a less overt way.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 represented the pinnacle of all these developments. A national curriculum was proposed consisting of three core subjects —English, Maths and Science— and a number of foundation subjects comprising a foreign language, Technology, History, Geography, Art, Music and Physical Education. A national assessment system was also to be established involving nationally moderated tests at 7, 11, 14 and 16. Under LMS (local management of schools) a school's funding would depend on the number of pupils it attracted, and thus on the degree it satisfied 'consumer' (ie. parents) demand; and the grant maintained system enabled schools to opt out of LEA control and receive funding directly from central government.

These provisions of the Act would be correctly interpreted as undermining the comprehensive ideal. Although a 'common curriculum' was always part of the comprehensive reformist vision, a nationally imposed subject dominated curriculum with accompanying national assessment structure certainly was not. Rather than common experience, the emphasis would be on differentiation and separate 'paths' within schools. The whole point of much curriculum reform in comprehensive schools had been to produce a curriculum which avoided the divisiveness and academicism of the traditional subject curriculum.

A system had also now been created which enables differentiation between schools. There had, of course, always been differences between comprehensive schools because of social differences in the catchment areas from which schools drew their pupils. Such impediment to reform were of no concern to the Conservative Government who took matters further by fostering the development of a whole range of different types of school - opted out schools, grammar schools, public schools, various forms of comprehensive schools and City Technology Colleges (a new type of independent school which charged no fees and was funded by private capital). The alleged aims were to increase 'choice' and cater for individual interests but critics (Jones, 1989) were quick to point out that what had been created was a more intricate, finely differentiated and more subtle hierarchical relationship between schools.

No attempt to understand these developments is complete without

an examination of the influence of wider political and economic perspectives and in particular the influence of the 'new right'. Although the changes, as we have seen, were rooted in a Labour Government policy development which incorporated right wing critiques of comprehensive schools, the radical right reform of the 1980s were located in an ideological world view fundamentally different from that which underpinned the liberal and social democratic consensus of the previous era. Against the background of a restructured world economy, the development of new industries and technologies and the decline of old 'heavy' industries, the perceived requirement was for a reinvigorated private sector and the creation of an enterprise culture. Social democracy had allegedly created barriers to progress. Its legacy was an expanded inefficient public sector, crippling restrictions on the free play of the market and an education system which aimed for equality in a context where inequality was thought to be necessary for economic regeneration. To cure these ills a familiar medicine was to be applied; the privatization of public monopolies and attacks on the 'waste' and inefficiency of the public services. At the same time, whilst the economy and civil society were to be opened up and 'liberalized' it was also necessary for the State to create the social, political and ideological conditions necessary for 'revival'. Thus within the 'new right's hegemonic project the restoration of state authority, the renewal of allegiances to traditional values and return to an 'old' sense of national culture and identity went hand in hand with the release of market forces and the privatization of public services.

As far as education was concerned, it was clear that the Conservative Government was becoming increasingly tuned into this project. The mark of the 'new right' can be seen on the flood of consultative document in education produced by the incoming Conservative Government in its first few months of office in 1987, which laid the foundation for the ERA of 1988 (see Quicke, 1988).

However, it would be easy to exaggerate the extent of the 'new right's influence. In the current period, there are indications that other Conservative political orientations have come to the fore. Further state intervention in the implementation phase of ERA has increasingly relied on persons and structures associated with the very educational establishment that 'new right' reformers sought to dismantle. Some ministers have seen the state as playing an important role not just in removing the constraints on market forces and providing a legitimating ideology but in actually intervening on a long term basis to create the enterprise economy. In contrast with the 'new right's traditional approach to education they have advocated a complete break with the anti-industrial values of the old academic, grammar school tradition,

and have asserted the need for a more relevant, student-centred, practical and vocationally oriented curriculum, exemplified by the 'new learning' rhetoric of TVEI. The 'new right' has not subjected innovations like TVEI to extended criticism because they have seen it both as a move to weaken the grip of LEAs and as a means to further the principle of differentiation. But there is increasing ambivalence about the spread of the 'new vocationalism' as an educational philosophy, particularly when this is coupled with more state intervention.

From the point of view of those who continue to uphold the comprehensive ideal, the 'new vocationalism' and its alleged progressive pedagogy are likely to be socially divisive and anti-educational. There is no doubt that progressive elements are an essential aspect of current reforms, but they are used to justify policies derived from a completely different set of values from those underpinning comprehensivization. The meanings of the central concepts of progressive education have been subtly altered - 'creativity' has become associated with entrepreneurialism and 'individual' is used in its previous reactionary sense of individual differences requiring different types of academic/vocational programmes for different types of ability. Individual characters traits and capabilities are removed from the 'private' sphere and linked to the needs of employers and the demands of the world of work. Education should stress the «worth of the individual» but young people also need to be taught to «turn up tidy and on time» for work. A positive self-image is encouraged but the purpose of this is to enable the young person to be more flexible in order to be adaptable in changing labour market conditions.

Within the 'new vocationalist' ideology the practical is divorced from the academic in a way which precludes the notion of a high quality common education for all. There is no attempt as in progressivism to synthesize the practical and the academic within a critical evaluation of work and society. Stripped of its progressive rhetoric the new vocationalism provides an ideological justification for an education system which is just as divisive as the old tripartite system. The overriding aim is the production of a differentiated workforce to meet the needs of a modern economy.

Conclusion

Since its inception in the mid 1960's the British comprehensive system of secondary education has a complex history. Despite its aspiration to extend educational opportunities to all pupils, it has constantly had

to face widespread public scepticism and considerable political opposition. And, despite its aspiration to provide an institutional embodiment of egalitarian values, British secondary schools continue to play a major role in the maintenance and transmission of inequality. Indeed, the comprehensive school with its common curriculum, its avoidance of early selection and commitment to the education of all its pupils may actually serve to obscure the inequalities in educational opportunities that still exist. The elitism of the previous tripartite system was transparent to all but the egalitarian ideology of the comprehensive system may simply help to legitimise the substantial transmission of inequality that still occurs.

Although comprehensive schools have had little success in eliminating privilege and elitism from secondary education on one who is familiar with the history of the comprehensive movement could fail to be impressed by the dedication with which thousands of teachers have seriously sought to give practical realisation to the comprehensive principle of equal educational opportunity for all. The very real contribution that these teachers have made to the expansion of educational opportunities does not mean that the overall effect of comprehensive education has been to significantly reduce existing inequalities. Throughout its short history the comprehensive school has, like any other social institution, been shaped by political pressures and ideological constraints. However, although the implementation of the comprehensive principle has always been distorted and constrained by the logic of the larger society in which it is embedded, comprehensive education faces a future that still has to be made. The crucial question is whether this future will be made in a way which keeps alive the egalitarian dream of a state system of education which treats all pupils equally, irrespective of race, class, gender or creed.

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Received: 3.X.1990.

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SUMMARY: AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?: COMPREHENSIVE PRINCIPLES AND THE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY IN BRITISH EDUCATION

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief account of the evolution of the comprehensive principle in British secondary education. In the paper we explain how, during the 1960's and 1970's, the comprehensive principle became the central organising principle of secondary education and why, during the 1980's, comprehensive ideals were gradually eroded and replaced. The central theme running through the paper is that the limited success of comprehensive reforms has been due primarily to the contradictions between the egalitarian values on which they were erected and the dominant social and political ideology of the society in which they were enacted.

KEY WORDS: Comprehensive principles; equal educational opportunity; egalitarian values; new vocationalism; «new right».

SUMARIO: ¿UN SUEÑO IMPOSIBLE? ESCUELA COMPRENSIVA Y POLITICA DE DESIGUALDAD EN LA EDUCACION BRITANICA.

El objetivo de este artículo se centra en la evolución que ha ido experimentando el principio de escuela comprensiva en la educación secundaria británica. Los autores ponen de relieve cómo durante los años 60 y 70 este principio se convirtió en el eje en torno al cual giraba la organización de la educación secundaria, y por qué durante los años 80 los ideales comprensivos se fueron gradualmente desgastando y reemplazando. La tesis central que recorre el artículo es que el escaso éxito de las reformas comprensivas se ha debido, principalmente, a las contradicciones entre los valores igualitarios sobre los que estaban levantadas y la ideología social y política dominante en la que fueron realizadas.