

A talk given to Comprehensive Future by Adrian Elliott on 16 January 2008

My own background

I started teaching in 1966 and retired in 2003 as the head of a Catholic comprehensive school in York. I have taught abroad, in primary, grammar and comprehensive schools. I also worked as an Ofsted inspector, as a mentor for new heads with the National College and latterly as a School Improvement Partner.

Book

The motivation for the book was that throughout my career the attitude of most of the national media, many politicians and many business people in this country to state schools has been hostile and negative and yet so much they have had to say bears no relation - not simply to my own experience as a teacher, head and parent - but also to that of so many people I have met who have first hand experience of state schools.

I also felt that the natural defenders of state education; unions, academics and so on were, quite understandably, often so concerned to defend their members interests or to improve the lot of the poorest in society that they can also end up leaving the impression of a service in continual crisis.

Outline

I had several specific aims in the book.

1. To rebut the idea of the 1950s and early 60s as a golden age of achievement and school inspired social mobility.
2. To demonstrate that the academic performance of schools today is better than widely recognised and demolish the major media myths about school failure.
3. To look at English schools' international performance alongside with countries with which we have most in common and should be most sensibly compared.
4. To show that wider school life; extra-curricular activities, sport, the arts, trips, residential and so on are in a healthier state than often appreciated.
5. To discover the truth about behaviour and discipline in schools.
6. Finally to look in depth at a number of schools across the country, which I knew were very successful, and to find out why they were doing so well.

1950s and early 60s

I looked at a wide range of evidence including school inspection reports, recollections of schooldays from several hundred Saga readers who replied to an appeal in the magazine, examiners reports from the time and a wealth of , government reports and statistical material.

I looked at the academic performance of grammar schools and showed that it just isn't true as the Sunday Times claimed last year that grammar schools were 'wonderfully successful'. In 1959 nearly 40% of their pupils nationally left with 3 or fewer O levels. At the school I attended in Sheffield only 2 boys in the C stream got 5 O levels in a five year period whilst in a Leicestershire school at this time only 20% of *all* pupils gained this number. I found the results of one girls grammar school where only 10% of the fifth year were passing O level maths in the mid fifties.

Expectations were often astonishingly low. One Dorset head, asked by HMI why a third of his pupils left with no O level passes, replied 'some will always fail to rise to the challenge of the grammar school' His school took in the brightest 17% of local boys!. (The inspectors verdict was that it was a good school). In one mixed secondary modern school the head explained why no science was taught to the girls at all by saying 'My science staff can't handle girls'

In fact it was clear that, whilst HMI were a lot more forgiving than Ofsted, they still found a at least 20% of schools to be clearly unsatisfactory – even though the phrase wasn't always used. One of the most interesting sources, were examiners reports from the time. I expected them to be critical but not their criticisms to be so basic. They are simply a world away from Daily Telegraph nostalgia of 1950s pupils writing beautifully crafted essays and solving complex maths problems. Whilst the candidate in 1958 who thought that 'Wordsworth sat on top of a bus on Westminster Bridge and saw the town and cinemas' might not have been typical, the examiners often reported errors which were common to many candidates. Even at A level, take by only tiny percentage of eighteen year olds, it was reported that 'paragraphs are often absent, punctuation poor, commas used instead of full stops and apostrophe's unknown' whilst in 1960 O level history examiners found many pupils believed there was a verb to 'higher' as in "the Chancellor 'highered' taxes". Spelling errors in 1958 included 'deffinate', 'fivety', 'polytitions' and 'Poit Loriet'

One of the most striking aspects of the reports is the complaint, to be found across all subjects, that so many candidates simply should never have been entered for the examination. Yet we are talking about under 20% of the relevant age group for O level and 7% for A level compared with the 96% who take GCSE today and over 30% sitting A levels. In the book I also challenge the views that examination papers in the past were as difficult as is often claimed.

Social mobility

The level of social mobility engendered by grammar schools has also been vastly overstated. Its often argued that under the selective system bright working class children succeeded in grammar schools whilst their equivalents today fail in the comprehensive system. This is nonsense. The working class was far larger in the 1950s than today so to make a fair comparison you have to look at how the poorest third or so of the working class fared educationally in the 1950s. Very few such children attended grammar schools and only a tiny percentage of those who did achieved much success. A government report in mid-decade tracked the careers of 9000 grammar school children and found only 23 from the unskilled working class who had achieved 2 A levels. I suggest that having a child

attend a grammar school was more often a sign of an *already* upwardly mobile family than the cause of social mobility.

Indeed, the poverty of some famous grammar school children from the past has often been exaggerated. Sir Rhodes Boyson was often portrayed as the epitome of the working class grammar school Tory. Yet his father owned his own house by 1936, was a councillor, full-time Labour agent and even chair of governors of the grammar school his son later attended!

A report for the Sutton Trust two years ago suggested that boys born in 1958 were more socially mobile than those born in 1970. Columnists across the media seized on these findings and claimed they were the result of the abolition of grammar schools, even though the actual report made no connection. Articles like Nick Cohen's in the Observer headed 'long live grammar schools' proliferated. Of course 1958 was the heyday of selection and it is true that by 1970 the new comprehensive system was well developed. But it is astonishing that no one noticed that the dates quoted were the years of the boys' *birth*. The report stresses the key educational factor was the decision to stay on into the sixth form or not and yet by 1974, when the 1958 born pupils had reached the fifth form, nearly three quarters of children were already in comprehensive schools. The columnists' assumptions rested on an entirely false premise.

Schools Today

The central section of the book deals with schools today and includes

- The challenges facing schools and teachers today compared with those of the past
- The *real* views of Ofsted on schools which are so much more positive than usually reported in the media.
- The evidence that real standards have improved: even if this is not by as much as some data has suggested, the trend is still upwards-a point often lost.
- The myths which are widely disseminated about state education : these range from the totally false claim that 20% of children leave primary school each year unable to read or write, Kenneth Clarke's statement that 27% of 7 year olds were unable to recognise A,B and C (the decimal point was in the wrong place! – the true figure was 2.7%) to Chris Woodhead's notorious 15000 incompetent teachers and his lesser known claim that a third of heads were unsatisfactory when Ofsted has never produced a figure higher than 11%.
- Improvements in London schools.
- The true performance of state schools compared with independent schools and the same with comprehensive schools vis a vis grammar schools.

A key point on the performance of state schools compared with independent is that all international studies show that there are three factors which militate against a child succeeding in school. They are

- living in a poverty
- having parents with low educational qualifications
- having parents who lack commitment to or interest in the child's education

I would argue that independent schools in the UK simply do not come into contact with *any* children who suffer from all three of these handicaps. The state system educates them all. And even though these characteristics say nothing directly about the children's ability very few indeed if any, I would suggest, are in state grammar schools.

International comparisons

I write from both my own experience of teaching abroad and also my analysis of international tests spanning a decade. Many comparisons commonly offered with other countries are meaningless. The Daily Mail last year said the UK 'even came below Liechtenstein in international tests'. As Liechtenstein is not only extremely rich but has a population of 36,000, the word 'even' betrays a breathtaking ignorance of how such tests operate. Instead I looked at how English schools performed compared with 11 other countries with which we arguably have most in common. They were the other 7 G8 countries plus the three other wealthy, western English speaking countries-Ireland, Australia and New Zealand and finally the Netherlands. Our average position in 19 tests taken over ten years was fourth – hardly the bottom of the league ranking so often claimed.

Behaviour

On this issue I again query whether the golden age was quite as golden as portrayed whilst recognising the real concerns about the issue in schools today.

As Estelle Morris pointed out many schools are oases of calm and order compared with the areas surrounding them. Ofsted consistently finds that behaviour in almost all schools is at least satisfactory and in most it is good or better.

Apart from class size the challenges now for teachers and schools in maintaining order are far greater than in the past. The average secondary school child is older, much bigger and more sexually mature than those faced by teachers before the 1970s. Evidence suggests that truancy rates were probably higher in the past, especially of children nearing the end of their schooling. Not all but certainly many of these absentees might have made life much tougher for the classroom teacher had they been present. And there was simply less pressure on teachers to ensure all (or, at least, the vast majority of children) were included.

When things go wrong now the media quickly hears about it and then of course we all do. I was astonished at the low key press coverage of some extreme examples of crime and bad behaviour by school children in the past, including the murder of a teacher at an approved school in the 1940s. At the trial of ten boys for the crime, the ring leader told the judge they had quite liked the teacher they had shot- it was the headmaster they were hunting but there was no point in leaving the teacher alive once they'd shot him. This story did appear in the national press of the time. But there was no editorial coverage, no follow up stories, no readers' letters, no acres of columns or hundreds of broadcast interviews and discussions expressing the nations' outrage as there undoubtedly would be today.

Extra-curricular activities

This is an area where schools in the past were very successful but it was interesting how many of my Saga correspondents believed that extra-curricular activities had virtually disappeared from modern schools. This isn't the case, of course, and I found a lot of evidence to the contrary. I looked up the Ofsted reports of a number of schools chosen at random, and found that in every case, even where inspectors had other concerns, there were a lot going on outside the classroom.

I also attack the wholly unfounded belief, still promulgated by some right wing commentators that there is widespread, ideologically - driven opposition to competitive sports in the state system. This is, to quote Fiona Millar, 'lazy prejudice' and has been unfounded since its first appearance in the 1980s.

Schools

I will not discuss the schools I visited in detail but will simply record those features which they had in common which made them good schools. Its not an original list in the sense that

these are characteristics you will recognise and would hear from Tim Brighouse and others , the NCSL and hopefully from Ofsted. But I visited these schools without pre-conceptions and observed what was happening there and what united them.

The schools were:

Secondary	Primary
Broxbourne, Hertfordshire	Maybury, Hull
Kingsmeadow, Gateshead	Holme-on-Spalding Moor, East Riding of Yorkshire
Park High School, Harrow	

The shared characteristics were:

- a strong, moral purpose and clear vision
- a warm, friendly and welcoming atmosphere
- an inclusive approach to all pupils
- a continual emphasis on improving teaching and learning, supported by good use of data on pupils
- a self-critical approach, with good ideas shared amongst all staff
- a strong stress on creativity
- varied programmes of well-run, extra-curricular activities
- attention to organisational details
- pupils having a real voice in the school
- shared leadership and responsibilities

After describing the visits to these schools I noted the following

'It would be easy to dismiss the schools described here as wholly untypical, as scattered oases in an arid desert. Quite clearly, amongst state schools in England today there are many which are less effective, less orderly and where children are less well taught than in this small sample. Yet these schools are not unique. Overall they are all very good, some are excellent but there are thousands out there like them'.

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