

Report of Parliamentary Meeting 20th October 2009

“Ending rejection at 11+”

Chair

The meeting was chaired by Paul Holmes MP Vice Chair of Comprehensive Future, who before becoming an MP was a secondary school teacher for 20 years.

Speakers

- Sue Roberts, Headteacher, Haddenham Community Junior School
- Phil Karnavas, Principal, The Canterbury Campus, Kent
- Tim Boyes, Headteacher of Queensbridge and Moseley Schools, Birmingham
- Sir Peter Newsam, formerly chief education officer Inner London Education Authority, Director of the Institute of Education of the University of London and Chief Schools Adjudicator.

Summary of contributions by the speakers

Sue Roberts

Selection in Bucks defeats the aim of community cohesion. It will never be achieved in a selective system. Grammar schools in Bucks have about 1% of children eligible for free school meals. Upper (non selective) schools in Bucks do not have the most able, so children there do not get the encouragement to have high aspirations which a mix of abilities can achieve. Primary education should be enjoyed but instead many children are being coached for the 11plus from age 7.

Why is it necessary to divide children into different schools based on a test? Why the emphasis on dividing children up? In fact differences in coping with delayed gratification can be seen at 3. We pay too little attention to drive and determination which counts in the long term more than passing an exam for which there has been extensive coaching. Young people who fail at 11 often go on to success in higher education if their confidence in their abilities has not been destroyed.

Selection has many other complex consequences. Most children will fail and need to be encouraged. Parents who decide not to put their children through the ordeal of two papers, with 80 questions in 50 minutes, are castigated by other parents as not doing their best for their children. There are other outcomes, trees destroyed by the resulting reams and reams of test papers without number; months and months of appeal panels and colossal amounts of public money spent on bussing children to school. Another emerging trend is that upper schools have to spend more on advertising for staff as they have a higher turnover of staff.

Phil Karnavas

As selection affects children in so many parts of England Phil Karnavas thought it might be appropriate to set a test on selection for the audience -

'Every Child Matters' - but do children who are good at maths and English, aged 10, matter more?

Given that 1, selective systems tend to create their own hierarchies of worth; and, 2. grammar schools will always fill - extrapolate the financial consequences of falling rolls in any selective area of your choice.

If a significant percentage of students at grammar school come from out of area then how can grammar schools 'sit at the heart of their communities' ?

All primary schools are comprehensive. All secondary schools are not. Explain

'Either selection is right or it is wrong. It, therefore, cannot be right for some areas and wrong for others.' Discuss.

To what extent can you 'buy' success in the 11+?

'A selective system is one in which the perceived success of the few depends upon the actual failure of the many'. Do you agree?

Why don't all children in grammar schools get better results than students in non selective schools? Discuss with reference to fully selective authorities.

'A test of short term preparedness' or 'a measure of long term potential'. Which best describes the 11+ ?

'Mummy I have failed' (anonymous girl aged 10 nb not 11). Has she?

Tim Boyes

'Smoke and mirrors' seems to typify much of the rhetoric surrounding secondary education and simple truth is often lost. In the context of Birmingham's several grammars, a recent visit to a three form entry primary school revealed all 90 year 6 pupils wanting to get to a grammar school. This was at a school where no children had gone to grammars in recent years. Parental wishes play a huge part here; the net result is a mass of disappointment and pupils viewing their new secondary school as second best.

There are increasingly ghettoised communities in big cities like Birmingham. Three boys' experiences illustrate key issues, both around the success of good comprehensive schools and the unacceptable cost of divisiveness in the secondary system. From a truly comprehensive school, which had been the bottom of the pile but with committed teachers, one boy is about to go to Cambridge to do medicine, another excluded from all schools when asked, named selective / unobtainable schools as those he had wanted to go to. He was the most vulnerable and needy kind of pupil left only with a school that he least wanted. The third, with no real experience of a community, has been interviewed at school by a police officer from the anti terrorist unit concerned with de-radicalisation.

If we have an education system based on separation it will compound that separation. In cities such as Birmingham community cohesion has a new edge. If the aspirant, more capable are always filtered out of the inclusive community school the ghettoised school that is left behind has a new cost to it. All hierarchies condemn some children to sit in the lowest tier. If this divisiveness continues we will see many harmful consequences, for example even more boys being interviewed about de-radicalisation.

Sir Peter Newsam

The chief argument for believers in selection is that this is the only way, in the public sector, for the highest standards to be achieved. So, although there may be problems with selection at 11+, as the 'Comprehensive Future Ending rejection at 11 plus' shows, supporters believe it is justified for this reason.

But is it not true that all grammar schools provide high or better academic standards, eg an "A" level points score of 1,000 plus (as at Winchester), than institutions in non-selective areas. The performance tables for 2008 should dispel the illusion. Farnborough Sixth Form College in Hampshire, for example, recruits from non-selective 11 to 16 schools, with a few refugees from the independent sector. Its average "A" level score of 1043.6, for 1,383 students, is higher than that of most grammar schools and all but one of the thirty-three in Kent.

The best grammars (high "A" level scores, 98% or more 5 good GCSEs and retaining students from KS4 to A level) could do much more if re-structured as post sixteen specialists, not selecting at 11+ but open to all-comers. Teachers at these schools are exceptionally well qualified to teach sixth form students to a high level. Were they to concentrate on that, they could reach at least five times as many students as they do now and transform the quality of education in their area.

The transition from an 11 to 18 grammar school to a Sixth Form College need not be hugely expensive or disruptive. Stopping a selective entry of, say, 150 eleven year olds and then offering about the same number of places to suitably qualified sixteen year olds, would create a 1,000 place Sixth Form College in five years. Would standards fall? Unlikely. Doubters should visit a Sixth Form College in an area where there is no selection at 11+. Try Hills Road Sixth Form College in Cambridgeshire, developed from a successful grammar school. Consult its website to see all it has to offer to add to an average points score of 1046.7 for its 864 "A" level students.

A new, post sixteen, role for many of the best grammar schools would have a profoundly beneficial effect on local primary and other secondary schools. Given assured access to first-rate post sixteen education, parental anxieties at 11+ diminish. The justification for ending an examination at that age must be to increase, not reduce, the role of the best grammar schools. Admittedly, many small sixth forms would close; but it has been evident since the late 1960s that the shortage of teachers capable of teaching able students at the highest level means that fewer and better sixth forms are needed rather than a proliferation of small ones, competing for staff that do not exist.

But why should the best grammar schools be bothered to change? School systems do not re-structure themselves. Markets do not reorganise schools. That process requires intelligent intervention. In San Antonio, some thirty years ago, a charismatic mayor declared that competition between institutions within San Antonio had to give way to a united effort, on the part of all the city's institutions, to compete successfully with Dallas and Houston. Educationally, that approach would require some of our cities and counties unitedly to commit themselves to raising their educational performance to that of the best, internationally as well as nationally. In such an effort, the best grammar schools and, in some areas, leading independent schools would have an essential part to play.

Points from discussion –

- The idea that selection offers a ladder up for the poor does not stand up to analysis.
- There is the biggest concentration of failing schools in the area where there is selection.

- Would funding constraints and falling rolls force change or in fact would grammars expand, including taking children from out of area and the school at the bottom of the pile suffer as numbers dwindle and staffing reduced?
- The whole secondary sector is atomised, out of control and inefficient.
- Academies are not the answer in selective areas if selection continues.
- There is a strong educational case for keeping the number of schools close to the number needed for the number of pupils, otherwise money is wasted which should be spent in the classroom
- Some argued that whatever government we have the chance of ending selection is nil, however others argued strongly that the damage to young people is so severe we must continue to make the case even more strongly
- Campaigning in local areas will be important, bringing people together.
- Parents have to be convinced of the need for change and that when schools don't select we can more easily reach the aim for a choice of good local schools for all which is what parents want. .
- All schools have to take responsibility for all the children in their area. Selection results in a failing system which fails the whole community.
- The DCSF seems not to consider the evidence of the damage of selection. We need to continue to focus on putting the evidence before the Dept.
- We have to take on board that 14 -19 is now a complex picture.
- Parents seem now to be showing even more stress over secondary transfer than before.
- Must not forget that there are outstanding comprehensive schools in challenging situations doing very well indeed both for their pupils and their communities.

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