

Comprehensive Future

Seminar at the Compass Conference June 18th 2005
“The Challenge Left – Can Labour renew itself in government?”

A modern idea – a good local comprehensive for all

The seminar which was very well attended was chaired by David Chaytor MP - Bury North, Chair Comprehensive Future

Professor Richard Pring Oxford University

Professor Pring is currently the Nuffield Review 14 -19 Education and Training England and Wales – examining every aspect from the aims and values which should shape the system to the curriculum and the most appropriate institutional framework of provision. It is a comprehensive and independent review costing £0.5 million and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Unlike the Tomlinson Report, which focused on qualifications, the Review has started by looking at the different kinds of learning experiences which are appropriate to and are engaging all young people from whatever background. Only in the light of such considerations should one think of the most appropriate curriculum, ways of assessing learning, qualifications and the institutional framework.

With regard to aims, it was argued that the words of Tawney in 1931 are still highly relevant: *‘What a community requires, as the word itself suggests, is a common culture, because, without it, it is not a community at all’*. Such sentiments were reflected in his 1978 sixth Reith lecture by Professor A.H. Halsey: *‘We have still to provide a common experience of citizenship in childhood and old age, in work and play, and in health and sickness. We have still in short to develop a common culture to replace the divided culture of class and status’*. This is where we must start, and we need to ask how we can create this common culture in comprehensive schools. However, there is little or no debate about the values which should shape secondary education. Instead we have empty phraseology (e.g. ‘stretching’ children, and ‘realising their potential’) and fragmentation and increasingly autonomous schools. Furthermore, under Labour, far from there being an increase in common experience, selection at both at age 11 and at age 16 has increased - significant factors in the disillusion and disengagement of young people.

The government continues to emphasise the false dichotomy between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’, which is confused with the more practical and experiential forms of learning appropriate for many. As a result, ‘vocational routes’ are seen to be the best for many young people who are deemed, now at 14, to be non-academic. Not only is this likely to deny to many young people the general and humanistic education so important for all, it

presupposes, without any evidence, that vocational training will somehow be more motivating. But, properly taught, the arts and humanities, through which young people are enabled to explore the values which permeate their lives, are just as motivating and keep together, in common exploration of what it means to be human, learners from different social backgrounds, ethnicities and religions. Such a curriculum would find a place for the voice and experience of young people in the exploration of what is of value in their lives.

Difficulties in pursuing the ideals so well expressed by Tawney and Halsey are exacerbated by the fragmentation of the system into differently funded and competing institutions. Grammar school places have increased by over 30% under Labour (albeit in the same 164 grammar schools which Labour inherited); the academies are independent institutions though supported by public money at a rate unheard of within the public sector which militate against the very co-operation and partnership which the government itself says is necessary to provide an appropriate education for all; selection at 16 ensures that the lower achievers leave for colleges of further education which are funded at a 13% lower rate than school sixth forms for equivalent work.

It is important to go back to the values which Halsey, Tawney and others expressed so clearly, to review the fragmented structure of the school and college system up to 19 and to ensure there is a shared experience for all young people. This is where the comprehensive system and curriculum should be going.

Dr Janet Dobson

Senior Research Fellow, University College London.

I have been involved with secondary education over many years, wearing different hats at different times in different places - the parent hat, the governor hat, the education officer hat and the researcher hat - and what I have to say now is a personal view which draws on all these experiences.

During the last two years, I have visited nearly thirty secondary schools in the course of research. I have interviewed dozens of teachers and non-teaching staff, local authority officers, HMIs and DfES advisers. I've ploughed through reams of reports, research findings and statistics on the current state of secondary education. And on the basis of all that, I have no doubt that the Labour government has much to be proud of.

However I do have a concern, which I know is shared by many people, about some of the policies which are being pursued under the banner of 'choice and diversity'. And I want to talk briefly about three issues: practicality, equality and democracy.

First, practicality, by which I mean: will it work? The theory is that promoting more diversity in the school system, with schools competing for parental favour, will result in better schools and happier parents. I have difficulty believing this and I fear that it may lead to bigger differences in school quality and more parental anguish at secondary transfer. In addition, research suggests that more diversity is likely to lead to more social segregation within the school system (1).

Those of us who query the choice and diversity agenda are frequently portrayed as dinosaurs. We are invited to step into the twenty-first century and abandon our

attachment to the era when all schools were the same and parents couldn't choose. But what era was that? 'Choice and diversity' is not some new, radical, twenty-first century idea as far as schools are concerned. There has been some measure of choice and diversity in the English comprehensive system ever since it was introduced and nowhere more so than here in inner London.

When my eldest child changed school at the end of the 'seventies in the Inner London Education Authority, as it was then, we had choice and we had diversity. Parents filled in a form with their first and second preference and there was plenty to choose from: county schools (now called community schools), Church of England schools, Catholic schools, the Jewish Free School, non-religious foundations like Camden School for Girls, boys' schools, girls' schools and various permutations of these. Not only were there differences in school type, but the inner London school system at that time was still in transition from selective to comprehensive and so there were huge differences in the curriculum offer and in the quality of education in different schools.

So, we made our choices and, then as now, choice turned out to be not what it seemed. If you lived in the wrong place or you were not religious or you were not a hypocrite and willing to say you *were* religious, or if your child didn't play the violin, then genuine choice soon fizzled out. And we all looked forward to the era when schools *would* be bog-standard in the sense of having equally high standards and a broad and balanced curriculum. What most parents in our area seemed to want was a good, local comprehensive to which all the children could transfer with their friends and without the uncertainty and the misery of not getting into the school they'd chosen.

But it was not to be. In 1979, the Conservative government came to power, and we got lots more choice and diversity: grant maintained schools, city technology colleges, the beginning of specialist schools, various mechanisms designed to help the market along, like formula funding, and the removal of artificial limits on the intake of popular schools.

And then, in 1997, a Labour government came to power and we got still more choice and diversity: the re-designation of schools as community, foundation, voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled, more specialist schools, more Church or faith schools, leading edge schools, academies, a charter school and so on.

And here we are, a quarter of a century later: my grandchildren are transferring to secondary school now and the situation they are facing doesn't seem all that different from the one we faced in 1978. Twenty-seven years of choice and diversity have not produced schools which are all equally good nor has it produced parents who are universally happy: indeed, parents seem to be becoming more unhappy as the years go by, judging by the number of appeals.

The truth is that genuine choice of school, in London or anywhere else, is a mirage, unless somebody invents the school with elastic sides. Every rational person knows that. A large-scale study commissioned by the DfES itself on parents' experiences of choosing a secondary school came to the conclusion that:

'Taking the relevant factors together, a presumption that parents value choice per se is questionable'. (2)

And Gorard and his colleagues concluded after extensive research into the impact of market forces and parental choice of school that:

'Choice does not lead, naturally, to diversity of provision. The pressure to diversify school provision, and move away from the 'bog-standard' comprehensive model, comes from policy-makers and their advocate-advisers, rather than popular demand.' (3)

If we really want an equally good school for every child, and a secondary transfer process that makes every child feel equally valued, then I think we have to abandon the market theology.

This takes us on to the issue of equality. One of the problems about diversity is that we seem to be incapable in this country of thinking about school diversity without hierarchy. The 2001 Green Paper called 'Schools Building on Success' effectively proposed a hierarchy, with advanced specialist schools at the top, then specialist schools, then non-specialist schools, and then – I don't know – perhaps struggling schools and failing schools. There was so much protest that ministers redefined it as a ladder, with all schools working their way up. But the thing about a ladder, as we all know, is that you can never draw level with the person above you, let alone overtake them. The imagery of the ladder did not suggest a levelling up of quality or 'the best for all'. Indeed, the Green Paper actually referred to *'encouraging the best to advance further and faster'* (4).

Since then, the ladder has disappeared from view. Advanced specialist schools have been reincarnated as 'leading edge schools'. All schools can become specialist schools but some are now taking on a second specialism while others have none. The Prime Minister himself, speaking to the Fabian Society last year, specifically stated that: *'Our task is to level up systematically'* (5). But there still seems to be an ambivalence at the heart of government about whether to focus on flagships or to try to create first class schools for everybody.

The present Secretary of State for Education told the North of England conference in January this year that

'Academies offer choice and diversity – often in areas where choice was limited to several weak schools – a choice on paper but no real choice at all.' (6)

It is not obvious how this presentation of the academy initiative contributes to a levelling-up strategy. Certainly, it does not help or encourage the staff of those 'weak' schools who are working themselves into the ground to raise achievement and win parental confidence – often, ironically, with extra funding and support from central government.

One key aspect of diversity which has an impact on equality is admissions policy. Most schools which are not community schools control their own admissions and have all kinds of different admissions criteria and processes. As a result, some schools end up with disproportionate numbers of children who are easy to teach and others end up with disproportionate numbers who have difficulties. This is partly a product of social geography, but it is certainly exacerbated by admissions policies.

If we're serious about every school becoming a good, strong school with the capacity to develop the potential of every child, then we have to look at the kinds of pupil communities that the system creates and legislate to put all schools on an equal footing as regards admissions. The Select Committee on Education and Skills produced an

illuminating report on secondary school admissions last year and its recommendations could make a big difference if they were implemented.

Finally, we come to the question of diversity and democracy. At least half the workshops in Congress House today seem to be concerned in one way or another with democracy and how involvement in the democratic process can be revived. There are numerous ideas about how people might be more involved in issues that affect their lives at the local level. Yet education is increasingly being removed from local democracy.

Local authorities are expected to champion the interests of parents and pupils in their localities, but how? How can they do it if the local academy or foundation school doesn't want to know? It is a problem now and it is going to get a lot worse with the current emphasis on the independence of schools. One of the consequences is likely to be that local authorities will find it increasingly difficult to place into schools the very kinds of children who they are being reorganised to protect.

The Five Year Strategy produced last year by the DfES is not very strong on democracy. It talks about creating a system of independent specialist schools and tells us that inspection, accountability and intervention to tackle failure are essential *'for independence to thrive properly'* (7). Many would argue that these arrangements are essential because schools are paid for by the tax-payer and because there is a crucial public interest in what schools do and how they do it. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of schools are to be put under the control of private organisations and wealthy individuals.

So, what of the future? Well, I agree with many parts of the Five Year Strategy: for example, the aim to put *'Schools at the heart of their communities, working closely with parents to support children'* and the aim to achieve a *'Seamless transition from primary to secondary school'*. (8)

Above all, I suggest that the policies of a government committed to equality and democracy should be firmly focused on the aspiration of the best for all, provided within a local democratic framework. Every other policy should be judged in relation to that – policies on admissions, resources, governance and on diversity itself.

I am *not*, repeat not, suggesting that parents should cease to have the right to express a preference for the school they would like their child to attend, *nor* am I suggesting that all forms of diversity should be eliminated. But I think we should be aiming for a system in which most parents positively choose to send their child to a good local comprehensive school. All the research of which I'm aware indicates that that is what most parents – *and* children (9) – actually want. In many places, it is what they already have – and they seem happy with it.

References

1. See Gorard, S., Taylor, C. and Fitz, J. (2003) *Schools, Markets and Choice Policies*, RoutledgeFalmer.
2. ONS: Social Survey Division and Sheffield Hallam University: School of Education (2001) *Parents' Experiences of the Process of Choosing a Secondary School*, Research Report 278, Department for Education and Skills, p.15.
3. Op.cit. p.191.
4. Department for Education and Employment (2001) *Schools Building on Success*, Cm. 5050.
5. Speech by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to the Fabian Society, 7 July 2004.
6. Speech by the Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, to the North of England Conference, 6 January 2005
7. Department for Education and Skills (2004), *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*, Summary: Key reform no. 5.
8. Ibid, Summary and Chapter 5.
9. See, for example, Templeton, J. and Hood, S. (2002) *Changing Schools: the impact of the schools admissions process on children*, Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London.

(Among the childrens' recommendations (p.29) were:

'Local schooling – moving from dispersion to neighbourhood schooling' in order 'To move on with their friends and the children they have known for a long time who may not be their friends' and 'To have a right to attend a local school which is good and safe.').

Becky Matthews **Kent Stop the 11 plus**

Becky invited the audience to forget we are in 2005 but go back 50 years because that is what life in Kent is like. Children across what is the biggest county in England continue to face the 11 plus. Every year as the results come out there are tears in the playground as children realize they will be split up from their friends.

When the grammar school ballots legislation came out in 1999 Kent STEP tried to use the legislation to get enough signatures on a petition to trigger a ballot. In Kent 20% that would mean about 50,000 parents have to sign the complex form required by ERS before parents could even be asked about change. For an un-funded parental campaign group, it is impossible to achieve this target.

It is not like the sort of petition anyone might be asked to sign in the shopping centre. The petition forms are detailed and include the child's name – understandably parents

are reluctant to give this information. The petition form is very complicated and takes ages to fill in. It is not possible to do in a school playground even if the school were to permit it. Schools are not allowed to send the forms home to parents and campaigners have little opportunity to find out who eligible parents are. How are parents to even get a petition form?

Unlike any other LEA reorganization there is no plan for parents to vote for or against. The form merely says that the grammar schools listed on the form should admit children of all abilities. So as a result the full force of the argument to keep selection is about not ending traditional arrangements and for 'no change'.

What had taken all the campaigners by surprise was the vehemence of the press to which they were exposed. Several newspapers ran vitriolic articles attacking campaigners personally. The local newspapers at first were unwilling to give space to anti-selection arguments, this situation has changed. Nonetheless without a lead from Government it is impossible to get a proper debate about selection.

Becky concluded that the only way forward was for everyone to lobby their Labour MPs to scrap the legislation, for Government to take the lead and end selection.

**Comprehensive Future
PO Box 44327 London SW20 0WD
www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk**

Click the [BACK](#) button on your browser to return to the Home Page