

Conference Report
1 May 2004

Comprehensive Future

Campaigning for a change in Labour policy to bring about an end to selection at 11 both by ability and aptitude

Whose Choice? Ending selection in the third term

A Comprehensive Future Conference
May 1st 2004, Birmingham

Patron

Fiona Millar
Lord Hunt of Kings
Heath

Chair

David Chaytor MP

Secretary

Margaret Tulloch

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Welcome

The conference Chair, **David Chaytor MP**, opened the conference and welcomed the speakers.

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath

Lord Hunt has four children in Birmingham schools, three in comprehensives, one in primary. Birmingham 20 years ago was in crisis in terms of unemployment and morale. There has been a renaissance since then. In education the efforts of Theresa Stewart and Tim Brighouse have made a huge difference, but the effect of grammar schools superimposed on the education scene remains.

In the playgrounds of primary schools from year 4 there is talk of coaching: the divisiveness of selection sets in: of course children are affected by failure at 11: children who fail end up going to schools which their parents have told them are no good. Birmingham is still affected by this in 2004, in fact it may be going backwards.

Figures of children transferring to grammar schools from the least and most prosperous wards in Birmingham show the educational and social apartheid which the grammar school system causes. 'Comprehensive' schools in Birmingham are deprived of about 5% of children from the top of the ability range. *'Just think what we could do if we had a fully comprehensive system'*.

Attempts were made in Birmingham some years ago to gather a petition. The petitioning and balloting system is bizarre, particularly in relation to the feeder school regulations. Parents most affected by selection do not get a vote. There is the huge problem of reaching the 20% of the electorate to sign a petition. It is difficult to get the parental lists from schools, it is impossible to get a real debate and an objective commentary for parents on the effect of selection.

Lord Hunt had to confess as education whip he had to get the regulations through the Lords in 1998, where they were *'carved up'* by Roy Hattersley. It is clear now that as these regulations stand they will not do the business.

We could put a lot of effort into trying to change the regulations. But this

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cannot be a substitute for a whole debate on education inequality. There is a marked contrast here with government policy on health, where there are real concerns to ensure targets are set to reduce inequality.

Roy Hattersley

He had thought that by this time this argument would have been over, that the case is so strong and so strongly supported that it was inconceivable that grammar schools would remain. Instead despite the famous 'read my lips' from David Blunkett we now have more grammar school places and schools selecting 10% on 'aptitude'. The people who should be supporting comprehensive education are denigrating it instead.

It is the comprehensive system which provides the best education for most people, it has succeeded in sending so many people into higher education that we cannot now afford to pay them to go.

It is important to confront some of the myths which are held in support of the retention of selection.

Parents want the 11 plus

Some may do so for what they see as the positional good of being different from the people across the road. An honest ballot might have shown that most parents are not prejudiced like that.

Ending selection would destroy good schools

Some grammar schools are good, some not, but the argument is the effect this minority of schools have on all the rest.

Diversity

It is misleading to suggest as some do that 'comprehensive' schools and grammars can exist side by side.

Grammars provide ladders

We must think of what that implies - that we tolerate an education system which is so bad from which an escape is necessary. We want an education system from which escape is not necessary.

This Government has spent money on nursery and primary education, for example the literacy and numeracy strategies. But comprehensive primary education in the areas where parents still have the choice of putting their children in for the 11 plus breaks down. Even the 11 year olds whose parents are not putting them in for the test spend the last two terms of their primary education preparing for it. This is the nonsense of the 11 plus - the illogicality which we tolerate for social prejudice not educational reasons.

We should not run away from the challenge that we are in favour of social engineering. Every education system is a form of social engineering. Is Eton not a form of social engineering? We want a united society not one divided into sheep and goats segregated into different institutions. *'We must argue these emotional arguments with great ferocity'*.

The National Policy Forum might offer a change for change.

'We can win with devotion and determination, if not this year then the year

after that. Our case is too strong and too right to give up.'

Professor Margaret Maden
Some research evidence relevant to non-selective secondary education

The argument is based on the assumption that a comprehensive school is socially and ethnically mixed, as well as in terms of pupils' attainment levels and with regard to a broad and balanced curriculum for all.

A. International Evidence

PISA (Performance for International Student Assessment, OECD Paris 2000) reported on assessments of 15 year olds in Reading, Mathematical and Scientific Literacy in independently supervised tests. UK, was 4th in science, 7th in reading and 8th in maths.

However the UK performance gap between high and low achievers is twice that of Korea which had a similarly performing average. In the UK this gap is primarily related to social class.

PISA findings -

Countries which combined **high performance and high equality** (ie across and between socio-economic groups) were Finland, Korea, Japan, Sweden, Canada and Iceland

Countries showing **high performance but high inequality** were Australia, Belgium and UK

Countries showing **low performance and high inequality** were Germany, Hungary and Luxembourg

PISA showed therefore that non selective school systems combine high performance and high equality. Countries with the lowest income gaps between high and low earners perform well, eg Finland, Japan and Korea compared to the USA and Portugal, it seems as a result of equitable learning opportunities.

The study also showed up ethnic variations, in Australia gaps between white and indigenous aboriginal children; in Germany Turkish guest workers were largely in the *hauptschule*.

To quote from the report (p 198 and 210) -

'the combined impact of the school's socio-economic intake can have an appreciable effect on student performance - and generally has a greater effect on predicted student scores than the student's own family characteristics ... understanding this collective impact is of key importance for policy makers wishing to provide all students with equal opportunities'.

This acknowledges that there is an influence of the peer group on the performance of students from families where high educational attainment is unfamiliar. This is in line with **Croxford's** work in Scotland and **Scheeren's** work in the Netherlands. So ensuring balanced intakes is an important policy issue.

B. Evidence relating to England

1. Social factors

A report (March 2004) from the **Social Exclusion Unit**, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister - 'Tackling Social Exclusion: Taking Stock' reported that -

- 23% of children eligible for free school meals achieve 5+ A* - C GCSEs compared to 54% children generally
- In the 1990s children replaced pensioners as the most prevalent group living poverty (half the national average income or less).
- 'a teenager from a deprived neighbourhood is five times more likely to go to a failing school and less likely to achieve good qualifications, compared to their peers'.
- Only 12% in the lowest income decile have access to PCs
- Groups which face particular problems are -
 - Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi boys
 - Children without parental support
 - Children eligible for free school meals
- The major issues in the 88 most deprived areas (identified in the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy) are worklessness, crime and low educational attainment (identified from age 22 months) plus teenage pregnancy, families in Bed and Breakfast and rough sleepers.

The **National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)** argue that eligibility for free school meals (fsm) is a key indicator and/or correlate of low school performance. **Gorard** has found that compared to an overall rate of 16.5% for fsm across England Catholic voluntary aided specialist schools have 7.1% and language specialist schools have 10.2% and the grammar schools 2.1%. **Goldstein** says that key indicators of low performance are individual prior attainment and school stability (pupil mobility).

An analysis (by the **National Audit Office and NFER**) found that most progress was made by girls and by some ethnic groups. School stability and English as an Additional Language are also important factors. Least progress was made by older pupils and pupils with special educational needs and amongst those who were eligible for free school meals. The greatest school performance variations relate to pupil characteristics, compared to school or LEA effectiveness.

Gorard has investigated whether the marketisation of schools and the emergence of more school types since the 1990s has led to increased social segregation in schools. His 'segregation index' is a calculation of the number of poorer children which would be needed for a school's intake would be equal to the LEA profile. **Goldstein** challenges Gorard's work especially as the index depends on school size which had increased by 18% during the initial period being studied (1988 - 95).

2. School types - greater school diversity

Gorard has found from 1988 - 95 social segregation decreased but since then has identified 29% of secondary schools as having intakes which are 'more privileged'. This is most marked in grammar, 14-18 upper schools, specialist, foundation and voluntary aided C of E schools. He concludes that schools that are specialist and their own admission authorities are most privileged.

Goldstein also argues that it is the achievement gap between schools not the social gap that is of greatest concern. He suggests that schools are

choosing children with higher prior attainment who are likely to do well later. However of course attainment at KS1 and 2 might be linked to social support and stability.

Jesson studied 357 secondary schools in the 15 fully selective LEAs, (107 grammar schools and 250 'secondary moderns'). He found that selective LEAs have –

- more failing schools than non selective LEAs (10 of the 15 have 'lower than expected GCSE results');
- the proportion of schools facing challenging circumstances is double that nationally
- school improvement rates are lower

Whitty and colleagues studied four groups of academically able students from age 11 to 20 some of whom had taken up assisted places in independent schools, others in comprehensive and grammar schools. He found differences in outcome in A level scores, HE entry and jobs but the differences were marginal.

3. School Admissions

West and Hinds at the LSE have looked at the criteria schools use for selecting pupils when oversubscribed. They found a number of criteria being used, through which schools although not selecting on ability, were able to select out pupils. For example by giving priority to children of staff members or to children of former pupils. Auditions could act as covert interviews.

As the number of schools able to act as admission authorities increase the possibility that more schools can do this will increase. Objections to the Adjudicator are possible when changes to admission arrangements are published. LEAs should be monitoring these changes.

4. Performance Tables and Value-added methodologies

In 2002 -3 the DfES introduced PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census). The census includes data on gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, free school meals and English as an additional language. This gives a National Pupil Database.

However as Harvey Goldstein has pointed out official performance tables are still published unadjusted and the methodological quality is poor. There are issues of pupil mobility, not just within key stages but between them, uncertainty intervals are needed because of the small numbers involved, this is especially marked in primary schools. Schools need pupils individual KS2 scores. Differential effectiveness needs to be built in to school comparisons, for example we know that some schools are very effective with low scoring pupils others with high scoring. Goldstein's work with Hampshire County Council and OfSTED shows the unreliability of 'proxy measures' in constructing value added tables, especially FSM and average prior attainment.

C. Research Questions

There is more work to be done. We need to know the costs of choice eg travel costs, inequalities of per capita funding, admissions process including appeals. What is the impact of choice on home school links, on communities, on the less well off and on less confident families and children? We need to know more about the 'unchosen'. Disadvantaged

pupils and families: who are they? What schools do they attend re staff expertise, turnover etc? Is there a critical mass of more advantaged and ambitious children schools need if the full effects of peer influence are to work?

Admissions - there needs to be a monitoring role by LEAs. The effect on marginal groups needs to be examined. Criteria need to be 'clear, objective and fair'.

We need to improve the methodology of league tables, identify good practice at home and abroad and look at the curriculum, the core and specialisms.

References

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Education and the Middle Class. Power, Whitty and Edwards. Open University Press. 2003

Knowledge and Skills for Life: First results from PISA OECD, Paris 2000
Secondary School Admissions in England: Exploring the extent of overt and covert selection West and Hinds Research and Information on State Education <http://www.risetrust.org.uk/admissions.html> 2003

Performance of Maintained Secondary Schools in England, National Audit Office November 2003

Tackling Social Exclusion: Taking Stock and looking to the future. Social Exclusion Unit, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister March 2004

The Report Card on Competition in Schools Adam Smith Institute 2002

Useful websites

www.ioe.ac.uk/hgpersonal Harvey Goldstein

www.nfer.ac.uk National Foundation for Educational Research

Fiona Millar

We have to be realistic about the political scene.

The vast majority of MPs and Labour members are opposed to selection but do not speak out as to be seen as anti-grammar is to be seen as Old Labour. The Daily Mail and other sections of the media who have a vested interest in talking down state education have successfully badged grammar schools as successes and comprehensives as failures.

We have to make a progressive argument bearing in mind that the Daily Mail will always be on our backs.

We have to puncture the myths and be less defensive.

- Comprehensives have not failed. Although we must accept that there are some failings within the system it is clear that the comprehensive model is still the best one.
- The majority of middle England has children in state comprehensive schools.

- Entry into grammar schools is dominated by money. There is a huge tutoring industry.
- Selection is anti-choice. The Government conflates diverse admissions with diverse provision. Choice in provision is not the same as choice in access.
- We are not arguing for abolishing grammar schools, but changing the way they admit their pupils. Would they not be good schools with a different intake?

Vilification will happen. We have to be pro-active, responding immediately to the proponents of selection for example writing immediately to newspapers.

The campaign for comprehensive education has to be re-badged, emphasizing that this is a progressive idea - giving more choice, raising standards and increasing opportunity.

'The only way of modernising comprehensive education is to make it more comprehensive'

After discussion at the final plenary Labour members at the conference agreed that *Comprehensive Future* should press for the Government to promise to end all selection by ability and aptitude within the first two years of the next parliament.

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