

Briefing paper: Grammar Schools

For those charged in the midst of the Second World War with reimagining the structures of English and Welsh education once peace returned, the expansion of grammar schools seemed to promise the means through which the country's cleverest children from all classes would gain the opportunity to succeed upon their own merits, in a school environment designed to cater to their specialist academic needs. Within the post-1944 tripartite system the grammars were intended to educate a new 'aristocracy of intellect to replace the aristocracy of birth and wealth', the top 15% of children selected for their intelligence, irrespective of social background [Norwood Report, 1943]. Yet, despite this promise, grammars quickly became focal points in the polarising debates around the state of the post-war meritocratic experiment [e.g. Glass, 1954; Young, 1959]. To their supporters, they represented (as they continue to do) the surest way for talented, clever, working class children to overcome the limitations imposed by their background and attain upward social mobility [Sandbrook, 2012]; amongst their detractors they were (and remain) little more than state subsidised bastions of middle class privilege and guarantors of entrenched social hierarchies [Reay, 2006; Todd, 2015; Ball, 2017]. Yet, while the 'grammar school myth' has come under sustained attack, its potency has proved remarkably resistant to empirical research. As a result, these divergent narratives remain entrenched in both the historiography and the multitude of institutional histories and 'grammar school kid-done-good' memoirs that appeared across the late 20th century.

The proportion of pupils in maintained grammar schools in the late 1940s far exceeded Norwood's expectations (partly due to the failure of many LEAs to establish sufficient numbers of technical schools), with 37.8% (504,599 pupils) of the secondary population being educated in one of the 1,207 grammar schools in England and Wales. Nevertheless, it did not take long to become clear that few parents were satisfied with the narrowness of the educational ladder put in place by the Butler Act and that LEAs would face constant pressure to provide evermore grammar school places [Mandler, 2014]. These demands intensified as the baby boomers reached secondary school age but grammar school places failed to expand to match, meaning that the proportion in grammar schools fell throughout the period 1948-65. Subsequently, although over 550,000 pupils were being educated in grammar schools (maintained & direct grant) in 1955, this equated to 27.6% of the state secondary population and dropped further to 24.6% in 1961 (in 1,284 schools). Entrance was selective in that it depended upon a child passing the 11+ or similar admission examination; however, access was uneven across the country, with provision varying between 10% and 40% depending upon region and LEA, and rising as high as 60% in Wales [Carter, 2, 1962; Lowe, 107-9, 1988; Roderick, 2007]. Even as the Norwood Committee's central assumption that a child's intelligence could be objectively measured through testing came under sustained attack from the early 1950s, LEAs and grammar schools rarely responded in ways that mitigated the environmental advantages benefitting many middle-class applicants [Douglas, 1964].

Thus, when South West Hertfordshire's Education Committee dispensed with intelligence testing in the early 1950s, precisely because it was considered unreliable, and replaced it with an English composition paper and expanded use of primary school references as the basis for grammar school selection, the change only further benefitted middle class applicants to the detriment of working class counterparts [Floud, 1953]. Neither were grammar school places evenly distributed amongst boys and girls, with the former far better provided for [Brine, 2006].

Again, and again, sociological research undertaken across a variety of locations in England and Wales showed that far from enshrining educational equality of opportunity the grammar schools disproportionately benefitted a middle-class minority [e.g. Campbell, 1956; Floud, Halsey & Martin, 1957; Carter, 1962; Marsden & Jackson, 1962; Pringle, 1966]. Shortly after Labour came to power in 1964, having promised in their manifesto to end the 'segregation of children caused by 11-plus selection', Alan Little and John Westergaard completed a meta-analysis of the data generated by three prominent reports: Early Leaving 1954; Kesall's Applications for admission to universities 1957; and the Crowther Report 1959-60. Their findings substantiated the various local case-studies at a national level: 41% of grammar school entrants came from professional and managerial families compared to just 19% from semi-skilled or unskilled families (almost exactly equal for boys and girls) and that by the time pupils reached the sixth form this imbalance was even more acute [Little & Westergaard, 304, 1964]. Where Macmillan and Douglas Home's Conservative governments had sought to resist moves to undermine the tripartite system, Labour now embraced comprehensivization and, under Anthony Crosland, prepared to start war on selection within the state system. This policy, however, as Mandler has shown, did not emerge from an unqualified hostility towards the basic premise of elite grammar schools, which, in principle at least, retained the support of several leading figures within the party, including Harold Wilson. Rather, Labour followed the growing trend of parental opinion in the 1950s and 60s that demanded, if anything, the expansion of grammar school places; as the 1964 manifesto explicitly stated comprehensivization represented the extension of grammar school education without segregation at 11, or in the words of Hugh Gaitskell's earlier promise, 'grammar schools for all' [Mandler, 14].

With the issuance of Circular 10/65 LEAs came sustained financial pressure from central government to integrate their tripartite schools into new multilateral comprehensives. Although some put-up committed resistance to the loss of their grammar schools, by 1970 just 14 out of 163 local authorities in England and Wales still refused to submit plans for comprehensivization. Even after the Conservatives had returned to power promising to revoke 10/65, general feeling remained that their education policy ran counter to the general mood of the country. This proved so in several local battles, such as Bedfordshire where the Tory council tried to withdraw its plan for comprehensivization following Margaret Thatcher's circular 10/70 but was forced to capitulate in the face of parental opposition to the continuation of selection [Simon, 1999, 408-13]. Despite Thatcher's sustained efforts

to offer a reprieve to grammar schools in any area that wanted to keep them, the rate of comprehensivization only accelerated during the early 1970s [Sandbrook, 214-16]. Even so, pockets of resistance, often in staunchly Tory voting areas, were galvanized by Thatcher's effort to halt the rising tide (she was dubbed 'Queen Canute' by the leader of Barnet Council) and ensured that a handful of LEAs (and several counties) across the country retained selective grammar schools. This meant even after the 1974 Labour government's renewed efforts to abolish selective secondary education and the closure of 650 grammar schools across the country between 1971-78, at the end of the decade 162,993 pupils were still being educated in grammar schools and roughly 100,000 a decade later. Since 1990 the proportion of children being educated in the remaining 164 (163 since 2013) selective grammar schools, in 36 out of 151 LEAs, has stayed roughly constant at 4-5% of the state secondary sector. In 2015 this amounted to 167,000 pupils. The Conservative government's resurgent enthusiasm for grammar schools before the 2017 election reignited debates that had appeared long since settled [['Forward Together'](#) Conservative Party manifesto, May 2017]. Even as sociological research has once again exposed the limited benefits of grammars to the school age population at large and their failure to realise their core promise by benefitting the most disadvantaged children [Boliver & Swift, 2011; Harris & Rose, 2013], voices on the right continue to proclaim them a necessary antidote to low educational standards and declining social mobility [e.g. Graham Brady in *The Daily Telegraph*, 19/7/2016].

Number of pupils being educated in selective grammar schools

Year	Maintained Grammars	Direct Grant Grammars	% of maintained secondary pupils (excludes DGs)
1947	504,599		37.8
1955	528,455	91,186	27.6
1965	718,705	125,202	25.5
1975	343,658	130,818	9.8
1980	142,588	102,175	4.0
1988	98,912	N/A	3.2
2000		N/A	4.4
2010		N/A	4.8
2015	167,000	N/A	5.2

The grammar school system before Butler

Before 1939, almost all those continuing in state secondary education would have done so in a grammar school. These institutions had been part of the educational landscape in Britain since the 16th century

and intended to provide the sons (and later daughters) of the middle classes with a classical and religious education that would facilitate access to elite career opportunities. Although many of the schools that assumed grammar school status, both in the decades before and after 1944, could trace their origins back over several centuries, the categories of Direct Grant and Maintained schools were a product of 20th century educational reform [Donnison Report, 47, 1970]. Prior to the 1902 Education Act the majority of secondary schools (teaching children over the age of 13) were either independent or grammar. While many schools used their foundation endowments to support a limited number of scholarships or else were financed by charitable foundations committed to increasing access for poorer students, most grammar school students paid some fees. The 1902 Act sought to regularise the funding of secondary education by offering state grants to schools that agreed to undertake ‘a definite responsibility in the public educational field’ (normally done through guaranteeing between ¼ and a 1/3 of places to children from elementary schools). These grants could come from the respective LEA or direct from the Board of Education, or both. This system was simplified in 1926 when it was stipulated that a school should receive its grant from either the LEA or the Board of Education.

- Those that received a grant from the central government but were run by a voluntary body became known as **direct grant schools**;
- Those that received their grant from the LEA and were run by a voluntary body as **grant aided**;
- Those for which the LEA took control, albeit with the help of a percentage grant from the BofE, as **maintained**.

Despite the different methods of funding, before 1939 these schools were not categorized as qualitatively different from one another in terms of ethos, ambitions, and objectives, nor in that all comprised a mix of fee paying and scholarship students.

In most of the country the proportion of children attending a secondary school before 1939 did not exceed 10 per 1000 (including those at independent schools) [Campbell, 34]. These figures varied significantly depending upon location and broader local demographic trends. For example, the county of London experienced a significant fall in population from 1931-51 (4,397,000 to 3,348,300), with large numbers of middle class families moving to new suburban developments. This allowed more working-class pupils to gain admission to inner city grammar schools and fundamentally shifted the social make-up of many schools. The number of pupils from upper middle class, professional, and white-collar backgrounds dropped steadily during the interwar period, while those from London’s poorest communities rose concomitantly. As the school age population fell, so London County Council found it easier to make good on a longstanding promise to increase working class access to secondary education; however, this was matched by a steady rise in the proportion of middle class pupils in London’s suburban grammars [Campbell, *passim*]. Likewise, Wales’ extensive network of intermediate

schools, founded in the late-19th century, and a broad commitment to educational opportunity for all who were capable meant that a far higher proportion of 11-year olds were able to access grammar schools before 1939 [see SESC Wales briefing paper]. In contrast, the north east offered far fewer grammar places, meaning that only around 10% of elementary school leavers reached local grammar schools during the interwar years [Floud & Halsey, 1957].

After the Butler Act: the emergence of Direct Grant Grammars

Under the 1944 Education Act the differences between these three types of grammar school were formalized and invested with new significance. Fees were abolished in all maintained schools, with voluntary aided or voluntary controlled schools in receipt of a grant from an LEA largely subsumed into the maintained sector (although allowed to retain their voluntary status and thus a high level of administrative independence). In contrast, the 231 schools that received a direct grant from the BofE were given the choice to apply for a new Direct Grant status (on revised terms), become voluntary aided schools in the maintained systems, or become independent. The new terms were laid out in the Fleming Report under Scheme A [see SESC Independents briefing paper], which aimed at increasing collaboration between the state and direct grant and independent schools by requiring the schools to reserve around 25% of places for scholarship pupils from elementary schools in return for a continuation of their independence from LEA control. Separate from those pupils funded by the LEA, direct grant schools would charge fees on a means tested scale, with the BofE making up the difference between the approved fee and what parents could afford to pay. Despite recommendations from the Fleming Committee that they should be abolished, Capitation grants (paid based on the overall number of pupils enrolled) were continued.

Conditions of Direct Grant Status [Donnison Report, 49]

Funding & Admissions

- Required to reserve at least 25% of intake for ‘free places’ to pupils who had been educated in a maintained primary school.
- These places to be paid for by the LEA, although LEA is under no obligation to take them up. The school’s governors may elect to pay for some or all of the free places out the school’s foundation income or (subject to DofE approval) raise fees to cover this cost.
- If they wish, LEAs can pay for further ‘reserved places’ above the 25% threshold to bring the total proportion of free places to 50%. With the governors’ agreement reserved places can surpass 50%, which in 1970 was the case in 93 of the schools.
- ‘Reserved place’ holders (as opposed to ‘free place’ holders) do not have to have attended a maintained primary school.

- All 'residuary places' are subject to fees.
- Day pupils' fees are remitted according to an income scale approved by DofE. The DofE pay any difference between amount paid by parents and full fee. The tuition fees of boarding pupils taking residuary places are not remitted (for scales see Appendix 9 of DR).
- The DofE also pays a capitation grant based on number of all secondary pupils (£32p/a, per pupil in 1968) and an additional capita grant for pupils in 6th form (£84 p/a, p/p).

Governance

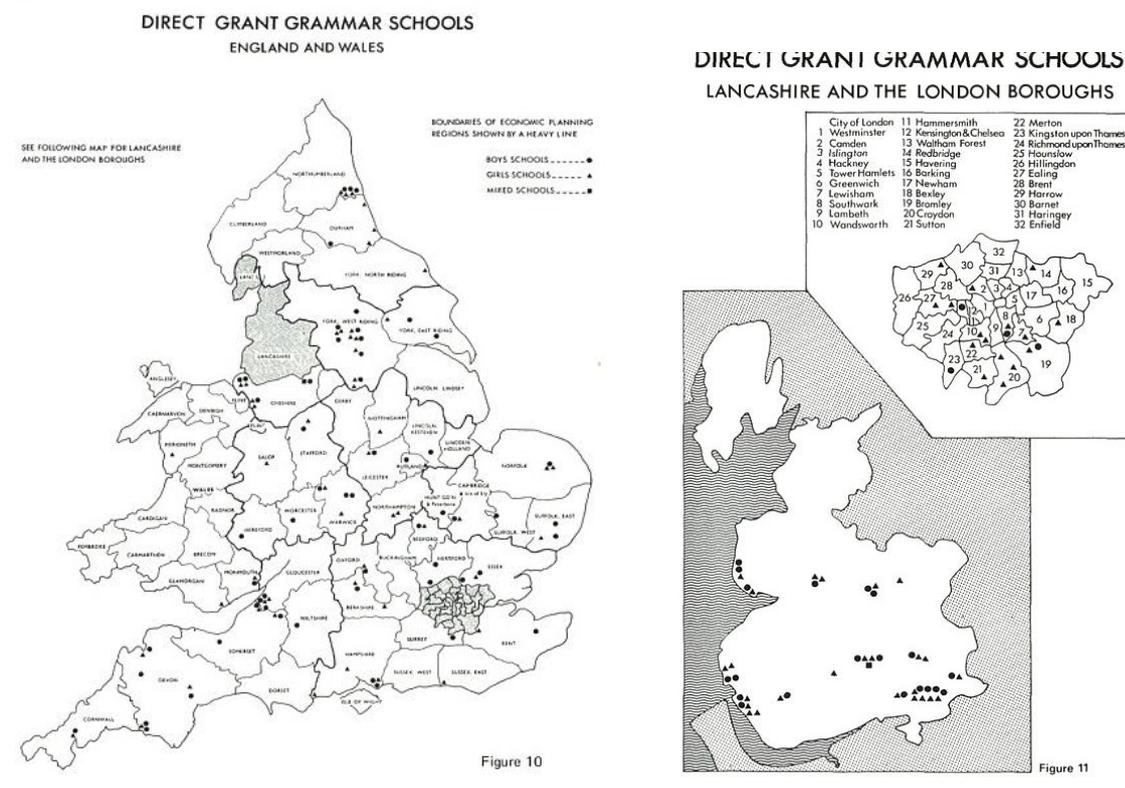
- One third of governors must be appointed by the LEA or there must be a majority of 'representative governors' (MP, mayor, chairman or member of local authority, chairman or vice chairman of an education committee or authority, parish chairman).
- Approval from the Secretary of State is required for any premises or alterations.
- Fees and other charges require approval of the Secretary of State.
- Pupils must be excused religious worship or instruction if their parents wish.
- Adequate provision must be made for the medical inspection of all pupils and lunch made available.
- Other conditions relating to standards of premises and efficient [financial] conduct of the school upheld.

Schools that had been grant aided before 1939 (either through a direct grant or via the LEA) were eligible to apply for Direct Grant status. Of 231 on the direct grant list, 160 became Direct Grant grammars, 35 became independent, and the rest entered the maintained sector. Of those schools which had been grant aided by LEAs before 1939, four were accepted to become Direct Grant grammars, while a further 27 applied but were rejected. In 1957 the list was reopened for a small number of further schools to apply for DG status providing they met the conditions already laid down. This resulted in 46 applications (43 from independent schools, 3 from voluntary aided) to become DG, with 15 accepted. This made a total of 179 Direct Grant schools in 1968, when Whitgift withdrew to become independent. The 178 consisted of: 81 boys' schools and 95 girls' schools, 2 co-ed, and in 1970 taught 3% of the secondary school population but 10% of sixth formers. All but one were selective and ranged in size from 200 to 1,400 pupils (average 616 for boys and 518 for girls). The schools varied widely in size of site (from 1 acre to over 400 acres). They were a mix of boarding and day schools. Nearly 1/3 of the Direct Grant schools were Roman Catholic (56), compared to 39 CofE & 69 non-denominational [Donnison 48-52].

Direct grant schools existed across the country [see Donnison map below] but mainly in towns. Heavy concentrations were found in Lancashire (46), Greater London (20), and Yorkshire (19). There were

only 4 in Wales. Teacher student ratios stood at 1:16.7, virtually exactly the same as in maintained grammar schools, but the proportion of graduate teachers (and top graduates 1st / 2nd class degrees) were higher in Maintained Grammars. In 1968, of the 101,236 pupils in Direct Grant schools, 60% had their places paid for by the LEA (60,550 pupils), 28% by parents (28,758), 9% partially by parents (9,284), 1.5% by governors (1,502), & 1% completely remitted fees (1,142). LEAs most often took up most number of places at Roman Catholic schools (at half of the schools over 90% of places were paid for by the LEA), and were least likely to take up places at boarding schools. In most schools, pupils tended to come from more than one LEA – with 71% of schools recruiting from three or more authorities.

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Most schools used examinations to fill LEA funded places, with the LEA often setting and marking the papers. For residuary places the schools set and marked the exams internally. In addition to the exam results, schools also received reports from primary schools, churches, and might conduct interviews. Some concessions were made in the case of pupils with an older sibling at the school and proximity to school. In 1968, nearly 80% of LEA funded entrants to the DGs came from maintained schools, in comparison to 38% of residuary places (remaining %: 34% from lower schools – DG junior division – and 28% from prep schools). In day schools the majority of pupils entered at age 11 (around 3% at 13, and 4% at 16), but at boarding schools a large number of residuary places were filled at age 13 from prep schools.

The Donnison Report was categorical in labelling the Direct Grants ‘predominantly middle class institutions’, which corresponded to Campbell’s analysis of London grammars a decade earlier. Donnison identified $\frac{3}{4}$ of pupils as coming from white collar homes, of which 60% had fathers who were in professional or managerial occupations. In contrast, 1 in 13 came from a family where the principal bread-winner was in a semi-skilled or unskilled job. Predictably, these figures differ depending upon the type of school (day or boarding), place (free or residuary), and location: 85% of boarding pupils came from professional and managerial homes compared with 57% of day pupils; 72% of residuary pupils from P&M compared to 50% of LEA pupils. This middle class dominance was less marked in Roman Catholic schools where 37% P&M and 16% unskilled. Academic selection underpinned this middle class preponderance. While most pupils were in the top 25% of their age cohort, there was little concession made for environmental factors. Indeed, where greater flexibility in terms of academic standards was shown it overwhelmingly benefitted residuary pupils.

Writing in 1956, Flann Campbell provides some local texture to Donnison’s national picture. He observed that in London the rise in the number of working class pupils attending inner city grammars was accompanied by a growing middle-class dominance of suburban grammars, especially the direct grants. He recorded that in 1950, 53% of pupils at London’s DGs came from upper middle/professional backgrounds compared to just 2% from unskilled backgrounds. Although the latter figure had remained relatively stable since 1905, the former represented a 20% increase over the same period, largely at the expense of the upper working class [Campbell, 51].

School culture and curriculum

Despite vigorous debates in the early 20th century around the need to restructure grammar school curriculums to incorporate more science teaching, by 1939 the focus in most schools remained overwhelmingly on classics, religion and the humanities. Even after LEAs took greater responsibility for the funding of local grammar schools during the opening decades of the C20th, the internal ethos and day-to-day culture retained more in common with the public schools than with locally maintained higher schools [McCulloch, 2006; Mangan, 2010].

With the expansion of state and county scholarships to allow greater numbers of working class children to attend grammar schools, so discussions around the curriculum became increasingly embroiled with wider concerns about how to integrate these children into ‘superior institutions’, so that could meet unfamiliar expectations. For many headmasters, teachers, and educationists the curriculum became central to this ‘civilizing process’ by introducing working class pupils to standards of written and spoken English that were assumed to be alien to them. In 1926, Frederick Boas praised London’s grammar schools as ‘natural centres of the revived study of the mother tongue and of our national literature...slovenly slurred articulation and a cockney accent are enemies within the gate’ [Campbell,

145-46]. This process gathered pace during the interwar years as pupil-teachers were gradually replaced by qualified teachers, who had either attended grammar schools/elite universities themselves or else been through teacher training that placed heavy emphasis on the importance of literary and linguistic education. Before 1939 then, training in science and technology continued to play a supporting role to the humanities, classics, and religious instruction. Even for those encouraged to enter business, engineering or industry, the grammar schools made little concession in terms of the syllabus, with the entrenched expectation remaining that vocational knowledge could be gained on the job.

Even after the fundamental changes to structuring, funding, and accessibility that accompanied the 1944 reforms, little changed in terms of grammar school curriculums [Lowe, 110]. Within the constraints of having to teach towards the matric or HSC, headmasters and teachers retained a large amount of freedom in deciding the day-to-day curriculum. For the first decade after the Butler Act, the focus remained on 'literary rather than technical ability' with curriculums differing little from those seen in GS in the 1890s [Campbell, 148]. Only once external pressures imposed new examination structures did the grammar schools start to refine their curriculums. By the mid-1950s, pupils often had access to superior science teaching facilities and a curriculum that placed greater emphasis on science, technology and mathematics. Even so, despite their reputations the academic expectations for many pupils remained heavily constrained. Before 1956 25% of grammar school pupils left before the age of 16 (35% in London) [Campbell, 148], and tended to enter white collar jobs that required the School Certificate but not a degree. As Olive Banks observed, for many working-class parents the appeal of the grammar school lay not in its educational merits but in the promise of subsequent career status [Banks, 1955]. Fifteen years later the Donnison Report noted a dramatic growth in the numbers staying on into 6th form across all school types from 115,000 in 1948 to 373,000 in 1968, with an even steeper rise seen in maintained grammars where the number leapt from 75,000 to 297,000 (a 300% increase).

These observations and figures point to the need to examine more carefully parents and pupils' attitudes towards precisely what they expected from a grammar school education. Paradoxically, even though far more has been written on the experience of grammar school than SMS or Technical Schools, from former pupils, scholars, and commentators alike, we know little about how attitudes evolved across the period. Similarly, it remains opaque what different individuals and groups, living across England and Wales, thought a grammar school education was for and what it made possible. Many former pupils' retrospective memoirs (often written by those who have achieved renown) tend to start with the premise that the grammar school made subsequent trajectories possible. This has ensured an extensive and influential body of literature that fuels ongoing calls for the expansion of grammar schools but remains almost entirely retrospective in its appraisal and offers limited sense of outlooks whilst at school. Selina Todd's recent reappraisal of grammars assertively debunks 'the grammar school myth' by recovering the voices, so often missing in more triumphalist accounts, of those who found the experience alienating and dispiriting. Todd is particularly effective incorporating parental assessments of grammar school

(and secondary education more broadly) alongside those of pupils sitting the 11 plus after 1945. Her analysis captures the difficulties faced by many working-class grammar school pupils (and refreshingly of girls' experience) in trying to adapt and fit into establishments dominated by middle class norms and expectations, and, in this respect, offers an important historical perspective on similar assessments made by Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden in their early-1960s landmark study. Recent articles in the mainstream press by those educated under the tripartite system have presented similarly nuanced accounts of the challenges faced within families where the 11-plus set siblings on very different educational pathways [e.g. Jeremy Seabrook in *The New Statesman*, 19/4/2017; Chris Horrie in *The Guardian*, 4/5/2017]. Nevertheless, far more work is required to explore these processes across the period and locale in order to place pupils and parents' contemporary voices and experiences at the heart of any analysis of the grammar school system. This is a challenge ideally aligned to the project's broader aims and objectives.

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