Briefing paper: Comprehensives

The UK has always had 'comprehensive' schools in certain areas, notably the parish school in Scotland, later the 'omnibus' schools which survived in thinly-populated rural areas and offered both certificate and non-certificate courses to different groups of students within an all-ability school. The 'omnibus' school was sufficiently well understood to be offered as a model for future development by the 1947 Scottish Advisory Council on Education. But in most urban areas throughout the UK, the advance of secondary education up to and for some time after the Butler Act was achieved by means of differentiated schools, on various bipartite and tripartite models. Comprehensives, or 'multilateral' schools (where academic and non-academic streams coincided within a single school), entered the public discussion explicitly in the 1930s when elements in the Labour party and the trade union movement began to advocate them as a model for future development (e.g. in the Labour party's submission to the Spens Committee in 1939) (Simon 1992). During the war there seemed to be something of a consensus developing, at least in educational circles, that multilateralism would be the way forward, but the postwar Labour government – for whatever reasons, ideological, fiscal, pragmatic (this is much disputed – see debates in Political Quarterly 1951 and History Workshop Journal 1979-80 and Francis 1995, Rao 2002, Chitty 2013, McCulloch 2016) – and most local authorities accepted bipartite or tripartite methods for implementing universal secondary education based on existing patterns of provision.

Comprehensive education in the immediate postwar period therefore depended entirely on local authority experimentation, which took place initially mostly in rural areas (Caernarvon, Cardigan, Westmorland) or in more educationally innovative metropolitan areas, notably the LCC and Middlesex (McCulloch 2002, Fenwick 1976). Kidbrooke (1954) was a widely publicised example. Coventry, Oldham, Reading and Swansea were Labour-controlled LEAs that adopted long-term plans for comprehensive reorganization early on. Over the course of the 1950s, however, reorganization came onto the agenda of most LEAs, as much through disenchantment with bipartite and tripartite systems as out of enthusiasm for comprehensives (Wann 1971, Fenwick 1976, Kerckhoff et al. 1996, Mandler 2014). Robin Pedley (Department of Education, University of Leicester) was probably the best-known publicist for these experiments; he wrote three books on comprehensive schools between 1955 and 1966, of which 1963's The Comprehensive School was very widely publicised in a Pelican edition). Leicestershire made an interesting experiment, much commented on at the time, with comprehensive middle schools at 11-14, permitting abolition of the 11+ without abolition of grammar schools; thus 'Conservative Leicestershire' was the first county technically to go fully comprehensive, in 1969 (Jones 1989). But most LEAs were considering plans for some form of comprehensive reorganization when Labour came into power in 1964 (see the list in TNA, ED147/636).

The process of comprehensivization has been closely studied by Kerckhoff et al. 1996, with some very useful case studies of London, Manchester, Bristol, Leeds, Stoke, Leicestershire,

West Riding of Yorkshire, West Sussex, Glamorgan and Northumberland, and deployment of the 1958 NCDS cohort study to assess demographic factors and make comparative judgements: thus Yorkshire and Wales had the highest levels of comprehensivization by 1974, the South and Northwest the lowest. Political control rather than social class composition seemed to matter most. Scotland's comprehensivization remains least well studied, mostly because it was less conflictual (Gray et al. 1983, Paterson 2000). O'Hara 2012 puts this process into useful comparative perspective (with Sweden, which was seen as the leader, but which also took a long time to reorganize).

It is difficult to assess parental reception of comprehensivization. Most parents welcomed the principles behind it, but the 'brand' had little name recognition, and this was mostly taken by contemporary commentators as hostility (Kynaston 2013, and cf the original Abrams surveys which he discusses in Churchill Archives; another good source is the 1964 Government Social Survey survey of primary school children's mothers' attitudes, in the Plowden Report 1967). The most common ground of opposition to comprehensives, apart from issues of 'quality', was that they were too large – '8 form entry' was widely touted as the largest size compatible with the sense of community and the personal control of the head that were deemed essential for good schooling. Resistance to comprehensivization tended to crystallize amongst grammar-school parents in urban areas, notably Bristol (for which see again Kerckhoff et al.). As Bynner 1972 showed, comparing parental attitudes in 1968 to those found in the 1964 survey, greater familiarity with comprehensives bred more positive attitudes; comprehensive parents also seemed to be more aspirational, among a set of interesting distinctive features (and see also Donnison 1967, Marsden 1971, Benn 1972, Benn 1975). As we move into the early 1970s, attitudes to comprehensives – as they become the 'normal' school – get muddled with other issues that are not about school type specifically but about secondary schooling in general: concerns about the rising tide of an autonomous and rebellious youth culture, 'juvenile delinquency', 'counter-school culture', 'standards'. The coincidence in many places of comprehensive reorganization and ROSLA to 16 confuses matters further.

So it is also difficult to assess how far there was a 'crisis of confidence' in the comprehensive school in the early-to-mid-1970s (Batteson 1997, Sandbrook 2012), as distinct from anxieties about social order or public services more broadly, or as actually registering at grass-roots level much at all. (Curiously, the highest-profile 'scandal' of this period, focused on standards, beset a primary, not a secondary school: William Tyndale School in Islington, 1976; although Highbury Grove School, also in Islington, became a standards 'success story' under Rhodes Boyson, 1967-74.) There were also new issues in the 1970s raised by having a unitary system for the first time: the idea of the 'neighbourhood school', for better or worse (better community or renewed social segregation?) (Rao 2002 – there may well be more on this in the specialist education literature); growing sentiment for parent participation through parent-teacher associations and representation on governing bodies (ditto). Left-wing

sociologists now reframed the comprehensive school, rather than the tripartite system, as the nexus of social control (CCCS 1981, Ranson 1984).

There was already at this stage talk of a golden age of comprehensives, when they had been beacons of equality, whereas they were now becoming factories of social reproduction (Marsden 1971, an argument that resurfaces later). How much does this colour the many ethnographies of comprehensive schools that 1970s sociology also produced (e.g. Willis 1977, Woods 1979, Hammersley 1983, Turner 1982, Measor and Woods 1984, Beynon 1985)? It would be worth making a full list of these ethnographies and considering them from both points of view, experience and representation (see further Hammersley and Woods 1967, Mungham and Pearson 1967, Sharp and Green 1975, Birksted 1976, Hall and Jefferson 1976, Woods and Hammersley 1977, Barton and Meighan 1979, Spender and Sarah 1980, Woods 1980, Ball 1981, Ball 1984, Hammersley and Woods 1984, Burgess 1984a and b, Woods 1988). This body of literature is heavily focused on London but not entirely; Welsh and Scottish schools are included; it is unclear whether any contemporary ethnographies were done in Northern Irish schools, though if so they were unlikely to have been comprehensives.

Against this, there was a dawning awareness that despite all the glitches comprehensivization was enabling more students to attempt public exams and thus to qualify for (if not necessarily to take up) staying on and HE, another argument that had been pressed for comprehensivization in the early 1960s, around the Robbins Report (Wright 1977, Rutter et al. 1979 – an important longitudinal study about the difference schooling could make). This helped gradually to swing the debate about comprehensives from arguments about social order and meritocracy towards arguments about high standards for all.

As has been seen, it is difficult after the 1970s to separate discussion of comprehensives from discussions of schooling in general. Two final issues should be highlighted. One is the way in which the premium put on 'choice and diversity' in schooling since the 1990s has led to the view that this period has witnessed the 'death of the comprehensive school' (Franklin and McCulloch 2007, Chitty 2013). Of course, most comprehensives are now called 'academies', but has this made comprehensives substantially different from what they had been at the end of the 20th century? Second, and more relevant to the comprehensive before 1997, has been the sociological debate about the impact of comprehensivization on social mobility and/or school attainment. This literature is worth reading for what it says about changing experiences and opportunities in the 1970s and, much of it, for its comparative use of the 1958 and 1970 cohorts (Gray and McPherson 1983, Heath and Clifford 1996, Bynner and Joshi 2002, Boliver and Swift 2011, Glaesser and Cooper 2012, Sullivan et al. 2014; and, for comparative perspectives with other countries, Jonsson et al. 1996, Breen 2010, and within the UK, Paterson and Iannelli 2007)

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