

Briefing paper: Secondary modern schools

Introduction

The secondary modern school is rarely considered independently of the tripartite system. This is largely because secondary moderns were, put most simply, the by-product of a structure whose primary function was to select pupils for grammar schools. For example, in his assessment of the secondary modern school in Education and the Social Order (1991), Brian Simon credited external pressures with the shaping of conditions inside secondary moderns. The inferior social and material condition of secondary moderns has been documented in a raft of LEA data and social surveys. These schools educated 70-75% of the secondary-school age population and had a predominantly working-class intake of pupils whose parents were low or semi-skilled workers. Many schools were housed in nineteenth-century elementary school buildings, resources were scarce, and classes were large (McCulloch 1998). **But the most defining characteristic of the secondary modern school was that it was not a grammar school, a technical school, or an independent school.** There was so much variation in practice and experience between secondary moderns, and they carry so much retrospective and political baggage, that an historical assessment of this type of school and its impact on the people who passed through them represents a significant challenge.

An alternative, and more productive, way of **thinking about the secondary modern school is as one iteration in a long continuum of mass secondary education in England and Wales.** This began with the 'Higher Tops' classes and 'Higher Grade' schools created by some School Boards between 1870 and 1902 (Robinson 2002), and was continued by a smattering of interwar LEA experiments in 'post-primary' education following the recommendations of the Hadow Report in 1926 (Moore 2001) (see below). These legacies, in thought and practice, were inherited by the secondary modern schools after 1944, and continued into the comprehensive schools in the 1960s and beyond. It is evident that educationists at the time situated the secondary modern within this chronology. For example, in his anthropological study Social relations in a secondary school (1967), David Hargreaves argued that the issues he identified in the secondary modern would be equally relevant for the incoming comprehensive system.

Gary McCulloch is the only historian to have focused on secondary moderns, and he helpfully uses this longer framing. McCulloch undertook a ten-year research project on the provision of secondary education in England and Wales from the late 1980s, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. He studied the educational thought of Cyril Norwood in detail and concluded that differentiation by the three 'pupil types' identified in the Norwood Report in 1943 (academic, technical, banauasic), and translated into a tripartite structure by most LEAs, was deeply ingrained and persistent in English educational thinking (McCulloch 1998; 2007). In Failing the Ordinary Child? The theory and practice of working-class secondary education (1998), McCulloch argued that this differentiation was 'tested to destruction in the experiment of the secondary modern schools'. McCulloch's arguments broadly follow



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Simon's in their conclusions, but his insistence on this broader framing make his work the most useful starting point on the secondary modern school.

The interwar origins of the secondary modern school

The Hadow Report of 1926 is significant for consideration of secondary modern schools because it was the first official inquiry into the question of education beyond the age of eleven for the majority of the population (those not attending grammar schools). The Report defined the 'modern' pupil as one who needed a curriculum that was general, practical, but not narrowly vocational. Education was to be related to 'concrete things' and real-life situations. Hadow therefore offered a blueprint for future experiments in secondary education, although the political and economic mood of the late 1920s and 1930s failed to produce the funding for a full-blown system of secondary education until after the Second World War. There was some limited reorganisation towards 'post-primary' provision after Hadow, notably in progressive LEAs including Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and London.

The impact of these changes on the children of the 1930s is very difficult to assess, due to a paucity of source material and the fact that the rest of their adolescence and early adulthood was profoundly shaped by wartime experiences. However, a recent article by Claire Langhamer and Hester Barron using a set of Mass-Observation essays written by secondary-age Middlesbrough schoolboys in 1937 suggests that this generation were concerned about job security, but had high levels of aspiration and optimism about the future, not entirely circumscribed by their material conditions (Langhamer and Barron 2017). **These optimistic precedents were harked back to in the late 1940s when secondary modern schools were being established and encouraged to work out the purpose mass secondary education.** The other significant policy document of the interwar period was the Spens Report (1938). Spens considered grammar and technical schools, and thus implicitly enforced the 'modern' pupil type as discrete and separate, leaving Hadow's recommendations intact for the postwar period.

The secondary modern school from the outside

The Education Act (England and Wales) 1944 did not enforce the tripartite system but compelled LEAs to provide a variety of secondary education and abolished fees in grammar schools. Most English LEAs went tripartite or bipartite, achieved through testing at age eleven, according to local conditions (Simon 1991). Local conditions dictated provision in Wales even more sharply: in rural areas multilateral (comprehensive) schools were favoured because of resources and staffing. This was resisted from above, for fear of a lack of grammar school provision, and Anglesey was the only Welsh LEA that had all of its pupils in 11-18 multilateral schools by the mid-1950s. Most urban areas ended up with a mixture of grammar and secondary modern schools. In 1951 47.5% of Wales's secondary school pupils were in secondary moderns, 45% were in grammars, 4.5% were in multilateral or bilaterals (modern and grammars streamed within a school) and 3% were in technical schools (Jones

and Roderick 2003). In Scotland, the Education Act (Scotland) 1945 resulted in a mixture of secondary school provision, despite an official recommendation for comprehensives, and an academic curriculum was more widely available. There was no such thing as secondary modern schools in Scotland, only junior and senior secondary schools. **Thus the ‘Cinderella’ status and associated stigma of secondary modern schools was largely an English and Welsh social and political phenomenon.**

This division was compounded by the unique educational situation in Northern Ireland. The 1947 (Northern Ireland) Education Act also contained similar provisions as the Butler Act. Importantly, the Act increased state grants for capital costs for Catholic (‘voluntary’) schools to 65%. State ‘controlled’ secondary schools in Northern Ireland were Protestant. Their buildings and traditions were inherited from nineteenth-century Protestant church schools. Secondary modern schools in Northern Ireland were essentially the **secondary intermediate schools** in both the voluntary and controlled sectors created by the 1947 Act, although most have changed their names to ‘High schools’ since the 1990s. **Their existence is tightly bound up within the broader religious conflict** (see ‘Briefing paper - Northern Ireland’ for more detail on both Protestant and Catholic intermediate schools). Historically the Unionist state has strongly protected the Protestant grammar schools in Northern Ireland, which retained independence from LAs until the late 1980s. They were permitted to reserve 20% of their places for fee payers (Jones 2016). There have been recent attempts to roll back Northern Irish grammar schools, but it is still hotly contested and selection tests remain in place. Integration has been the key issue for secondary education reform in Northern Ireland and is still developing. In 1989 the Education Reform Order gave the Department of Education in Northern Ireland a duty to ‘encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education’. Educational inequality in Northern Ireland was therefore cut across class and confessional lines.

Back in England, **both political parties knew the secondary modern school had no ‘USP’ for most of the postwar period.** In 1947 Ellen Wilkinson’s Ministry of Education published the pamphlet The New Secondary Education, which talked vaguely about appealing to pupils’ interests and ‘enrich[ing] the liberal education’. Under David Eccles as Education minister in the 1950s the Conservatives tried to bolster the secondary modern as a way of protecting the grammar schools. But this was glib, as there was still no strong or meaningful manifesto for modern education. In 1964 Quinton Hogg boasted that the secondary modern school gave each girl and boy an education ‘tailor-made to their desires’ (quoted in Jones 2016). This was the same generic rhetoric as Wilkinson had used in 1947. Under Conservative governments in the 1950s and in response to pressure at a local level, the Labour Party gradually moved more fully towards its commitment to comprehensivization, first made in a party conference resolution in 1942.

As Peter Mandler has shown, parental opinion was strongly in favour of ‘grammars for all’ from the early 1950s (Mandler 2014). When Quaker sociologist Harold Loukes surveyed secondary modern parents in 1956 he found an ‘overwhelming desire for their children to be

treated as a person in their own right and to find their way to a profession or craft suited to their needs', which the secondary modern wasn't providing (Loukes 1956). The dismantling of the secondary modern schools was closely bound up with the rise of the comprehensive school, achieved not through one top-down policy but in response to a democratic demand from below (Mandler 2014). Brian Simon identified 1963 as the crucial year of change, when both Manchester and Liverpool LEAs began to reorganise along comprehensive lines. In 1965 the Labour Party, in government since October 1964, issued Circular 10/65 which compelled all LEAs in England Wales to remove the selective system and convert their schools into comprehensives. Thus, the total number of pupils attending secondary modern schools in England and Wales gradually declined from its peak of 1,698,379 in 1961, to 1,226,619 in 1970, to 493,158 in 1977 (Simon 1991).

The secondary modern school from the inside

Gary McCulloch and Liz Sobell first argued for the need of a social history of secondary modern schools in an article in 1994 (McCulloch and Sobell 1994). As they identified, source availability was, and remains, a major obstacle. McCulloch went some way towards writing a social history of secondary moderns in his 1998 book, deploying sources including HMI reports, memoirs of Chief Education Officers, and further sociological and pedagogical surveys. **However, there is much more work to be done using the data behind these surveys, PTA material within HMI reports, untouched LEA archives, a thorough survey of local newspapers, and oral histories.** Stephanie Spencer's attempt to conduct interviews with women about their experience of secondary school in the 1950s reflects the challenge of oral history in this field: she received only two respondents who attended secondary modern schools, the rest were ex-grammar school pupils (Spencer 2004). The 'History in Education Project' faced similar problems in reaching former secondary modern pupils and teachers for their interviews and survey forms in the late 2000s (Cannadine, Keating, and Sheldon, 2011).

Despite this lack of material a broad trajectory for the secondary modern school has been established, although few conclusions can be drawn about the implications for pupils' and parents' experiences. Secondary moderns were encouraged to 'experiment' from 1947 to the early 1950s. From the early 1950s, in response to criticism and mounting pressure from outside, schools variously began to internally stream their pupils, develop specializations in line with the needs of the local labour market, and (gradually) enter their pupils for external competitive examinations (the GCE was available from 1951 and other school-leaving qualifications from external vocational awarding bodies became available throughout the 1950s). Some historians have seen the latter as the only realistic chance that secondary moderns had to live up to the stubborn, yet chimeric, policy discourse of 'parity of esteem' (Brooks 2008). But within this general pattern there was little uniformity. In addition to the national differences described above, it therefore seems pertinent to ask: **was there such a thing as the secondary modern school in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s?** William Taylor's study, The Secondary Modern School (1963), listed seven characteristics of

the secondary modern school, most of which defined them by what they were *not*: educating pupils not selected for grammar or technical schools; educating pupils not entered into external examinations; employing teachers not as well paid or as academically qualified as grammar school counterparts.

Secondary modern schools often looked and felt very different to one another, according to location, accommodation, and staffing. In Home, School and Work (1962) Michael Carter found considerable variation of experience even within Sheffield, between the older, urban and newer, suburban secondary modern schools. As early as 1956, Loukes was sceptical about finding the ‘quintessence of secondary modernity’, although he concluded that the lack of uniformity was understood by some to be in line with the (English) tradition of teacher autonomy (Loukes 1956). Secondary modern schools were staffed by a combination of existing secondary school teachers and new teachers who had come through the wartime national emergency training scheme (1944-51). This scheme was focused on recruiting ex-service personnel and condensed teacher training into a one year course. By the mid-1950s teacher trainers in the established Colleges and university departments noticed that their ‘normal’ (largely middle-class) students were finding positions in secondary moderns, and sought to adapt their training courses to meet the varied challenges of the secondary modern environment (Loukes 1956). Laura Tisdall suggests that this mixture of staffing provision in the secondary modern, combined with teachers’ poor understanding of popular sociology and child-centred teaching methods, made secondary moderns a key site of gendered anxiety about age and class in postwar Britain (Tisdall 2016).

In Secondary Modern Schools: An interim report (1958), Harold Dent attempted to survey the type of work being done in secondary modern schools. He created a typology of four groups relating to the quality of work schools were undertaking: (i) good original work; (ii) sound work showing touches of originality; (iii) sound but unremarkable work; (iv) definitely poor work. From this typology the pattern of specialisation and formalisation already described eventually emerged across the 1950s. Both Dent’s study, and observations by Taylor, stressed the fact that there were still a considerable number of schools simply evolving the basic elementary curricula (Dent’s groups iii and iv). Cooking became domestic science, manual work became wood work and metal work, and ‘drill’ became physical education (Taylor 1963). This, again, emphasizes continuity between the secondary modern school and earlier forms of mass education.

Nonetheless, some curricula were also being developed specifically to service the modern pupil; ‘a very large group’ according to Dent by 1956. Often this involved a process of in-school selection and streaming. This is a key trend reflected in the more pedagogically-focused sociological surveys of the 1950s. An early example is Theory and practice in the new secondary schools (1949) by Arthur Greenough. Greenough documented a Chesterfield experiment where entrants were tests, regrouped in the second year and streamed, and then shared some group activities in the third year. Sociologists remained alert to the problem of the unselected or lower streams, with Loukes feebly concluding ‘they benefit from the

general prestige of the school' (Loukes 1956). In 1967 Hargreaves examined a boys' secondary modern school in a 'problem area' in the North, which had streaming. He found that it produced a system of analogous social streaming, two 'subcultures', which linked lower streams with delinquency. This was reinforced by the social relations and processes internal to the school, including teachers' attitudes. Like many comprehensive campaigners, this led Hargreaves to the conclusion that different types of children should be given more opportunities to interact, for more healthy processes of socialisation to occur within the secondary school (Hargreaves 1967).

Another area of debate surrounding the secondary modern school relates to progressive education and its relationship to permissiveness in the education system. Progressive or 'child-centred' methods were the 'official' recommendation for secondary modern schools, alluded to in the Hadow Report and fully endorsed in Ellen Wilkinson's 1947 pamphlet The New Secondary Education. In Dent's typology, a section of his 'very large group' of schools attempting to work out the aim of secondary modern education in practice in 1956 were defined as 'Project schools', i.e. undertaking project work typical of a progressive curriculum (Dent 1958). Taylor warned that this was not the norm by the 1960s, although he recognised the influence of progressive rhetoric on certain schools, which was rooted in the post-Hadow hopes of the 1930s. Laura Tisdall's recent PhD thesis demonstrates that progressive ideas were poorly understood and implemented in the secondary modern school, so that the intended focus on the individual child became a limiting conception of pupil capability. Tisdall also argues that progressive education was gendered feminine, thus it was more likely to be resisted by male secondary modern teachers, leading to a negative othering of the male secondary modern pupil (Tisdall 2015). **These findings go far to explain the widespread media depiction of chaotic secondary modern schools in the 1950s and 1960s, and the emergence of discipline as a central trope in published works.** For example, Robert Farley's Secondary modern discipline (1960) had severe chapter titles such as 'Into Battle' and 'On Being One of the Boys', although his introduction readily acknowledged that the book was an advice manual suitable for schools in 'socially depressed industrial areas cities, and the older overcrowded suburbs'.

This example also underscores that published works, debates, and subsequent historical commentary on secondary modern schools has largely focused on boys' education. **There is hardly any historical work on girls' experience of secondary modern education**, despite feminist sociologists and historians of women both finding female youth and leisure fruitful fields of investigation in recent years. Moreover, attention should be paid to the gendered assumptions at work in sociological studies of education in this period. Sociologists situated boys within a trajectory of work and homo-socialization, whilst girls were associated with domesticity and consumerism. For example, Carter notes that the female school leavers he interviewed welcomed new life 'in which high heels and bright lights replaced ankle socks and dusty book cases' (Carter 1962). Likewise, Loukes observed 'The girls...will spend much of their working hours yearning for the easy gaiety of the evening, or retailing its delights next morning' (Loukes 1961).



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As these quotes highlight, sociologists have left a heavy footprint on their data and thus exist as mediating, expert voices. **The voices of pupils who attended secondary modern schools, reflecting on topics such as social relations in school, home-sibling-school relations, and career choice, are difficult to recover from the sociologist's data**, although both Loukes and Carter's studies suggest some promising starting points. For example, in Teenage Religion (1961), Loukes identified eleven moral problems from the secondary modern students he interviewed, which included authority, friendship, sex and marriage, and snobbery, as the most pressing. Carter's pupils strongly associated school with boredom, which they counterposed with the 'dignity and freedom' of work (Carter 1962). As commentators have noted at the time and since, the sense of 'failure' instilled upon secondary modern pupils as products of the lop-sided secondary school system stayed with them through schooling and into adulthood. It is therefore not surprising to find that the world of modern work in the early 1960s was highly appealing to school leavers. It remains to be seen how the secondary modern school appeared and felt to younger pupils, less close to the school leaving age, and how the secondary modern experience was squared with affluence and rising living standards in peoples' self-narratives after a longer period in work. The evident non-uniformity of secondary modern schools as institutions suggests experiences within them may not have been uniform, either.

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