

Max A. Hope

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State schools in England: Why social segregation and inequality still thrives in a ‘comprehensive’ system.

di Max A. Hope and Roz Stevens

ABSTRACT: *There is overwhelming evidence that England’s education system is built on and sustains complex patterns of inequality. A ‘comprehensive’ system, introduced in 1965, was never fully implemented and so remains as an aspiration rather than a reality. Focusing mainly on the social, economic and political aspects of comprehensive schooling rather than matters relating to the curriculum and teaching, this paper outlines the current state of comprehensive education and its link to inequality levels in English schools. It seeks to provide some underlying reasons for this state of affairs: legacy thinking concerning educational differentiation and the role that government policy makers have played in creating a weak form of comprehensivisation and then, though an emphasis on school diversity, competition and parental ‘choice’, weakening the system further.*

KEYWORDS: *Educational Differentiation, Social Class, Education Policy, Inequality, Social Segregation*

Introduction

Since 1944, the UK has experienced a political consensus in that education should be free, available and compulsory for all children, regardless of their social background. Where politicians have differed is in their perception of what this education should comprise. In England, the definition of comprehensive schooling has been contested from the start though even as late as the 1980s, classic definitions based on social democratic principles still persisted with McPherson and Willms (1987) offering a description of what features should be included in a comprehensive school system: one type of secondary school, no selection, minimum in-school variation with a broad social mix and access to certification before leaving school. The English version of comprehensive schooling has deviated significantly from this aspiration though, in some activist circles, the dream remains a serious ambition. Stripped down to the fundamentals, the comprehensive schooling debate can be polarised into two ends of a spectrum: at one end is the argument that children should go to their local, non-selective, unstreamed school which offers a high quality and broad-ranging curriculum to meet the needs of all children; the second perspective, which since Margaret Thatcher’s quasi-market reforms in Education in the late 1980s has become dominant among the political elite, argues for a diversity of schools in which the route to quality education is achieved through providing a competitive, choice-driven market system. These positions are justified through a range of arguments (often linked to driving up standards) but, crucially, both have also been defended in terms of the contribution that they make in addressing social inequalities. The public discourse is unwavering in its commitment to social equality, yet, as we shall argue in this paper, the reality is quite different. As the educational system has become more stratified and diverse, the challenge of addressing social inequality has increased.

Max A. Hope, *lecturer and researcher at the University of Hull*, max.hope@hull.ac.uk
Roz Stevens, *Education Lecturer at the University of Hull*, r.stevens@hull.ac.uk

1. Inequality within the English education system

In the UK at the present time, there is no one single education system. First, the system in England is different from that in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; this paper refers to the English system. Second, there is an independent, selective, fee-paying (confusingly named) 'public' school sector, which co-exists alongside the state-funded provision. These systems are separate but cannot be viewed in isolation from one another; as long as some parents have privileged access to an alternative system, the state-funded education system can never be seen as fully comprehensive or inclusive for all. Third, the state-funded system includes a large number of different 'types' of school, including 'special schools' for children with disabilities, maintained schools which are accountable to Local Authorities, 'Academies' and 'Free Schools' which are accountable to national government, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) for children who have been excluded from other schools, grammar schools which are selective and Studio Schools which provide vocational training for 14-19 year olds. This list is extensive though not exhaustive and reflects a particular focus of the current Coalition government's acceleration of 'diversity' and 'choice' policies. However, it should be noted, there has never been just one type of school in the English system; even when the momentum for 'comprehensivisation' was at its most vigorous between the 1970s and the mid-1980s, there were still grammar schools, secondary modern schools and technical schools operating alongside the new comprehensives.

Many of the education policy initiatives taken by governments appear to serve the purpose of exacerbating, rather than reducing, social inequality (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Reay, 2011). Research evidence indicates conclusively that the English education system is still located within a class-based, gendered and ethnically divided society (Abraham, 1995; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Dorling, 2011). In particular, children from more socio-economically deprived backgrounds have consistently been shown to achieve less well within the education system, especially when this is combined with other factors including ethnicity, gender, 'looked after' status and disability. Furthermore, access to 'top' universities reflect patterns of inequality, and according to the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute are 'as socially exclusive as ever' (Sellgren, 2013). Although class, ethnicity, gender and disability categories are problematic and allude to clearer distinctions than actually exist, there is little doubt that children continue to be born into households with vastly different levels of financial, social, cultural and emotional capital and, as a consequence, their access to opportunities in life are substantially enhanced – or restricted (Allan and Catts, 2012; Baker *et al.*, 2009). Even Michael Gove, Conservative Secretary of State for Education, acknowledged this point in 2014, arguing that: «we have one of the most stratified and segregated education systems in the developed world, perpetuating inequality and holding our nation back» (Gove, 2014).

These factors contribute to a concern, on the part of most politicians and educationalists, to find ways of changing schools and the education system as a whole so that they address issues of social inequality. There is an aspiration to replace the UK's long-established class system with a meritocratic one in which hard work and talent are the key drivers for success. At a recent party conference, Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister argued that: «We'll create an education system that, from toddler to graduate, allows all of our children to rise as far as their talents and efforts will take them, irrespective of the circumstances of their birth» (Liberal Democrats, 2014).

Many education policies of the last twenty years, from all three main parties, have explicitly sought to address these issues, from the Sure Start programme of the Labour Gov-

ernment (1998) to the Liberal Democrat's Pupil Premium (2010) and the Conservatives pledge to improve the entry standards for graduates undertaking teacher training courses (2010). The effectiveness of these policies is contestable, but nonetheless, they can be argued to link with examples of international 'best practice', as described in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports (OECD, 2013a, 2013b). These reports provide international comparisons in terms of student achievements at age 15 and also in relation to in/equalities within each country. Claims about equity, in this case, link to 'the stronger the impact of a student's socio-economic status on his or her performance, the less equitable the school system' (OECD, 2013b: 27). One of the central issues highlighted, and this is of particular relevance to this paper, is that inequitable systems have a tendency to be more stratified. This refers to stratification within the system (in terms of range and status of schools) but also within the schools (in terms of selection, streaming and ability-grouping). The English system is identified within these international comparisons as approximately 'average' in terms of achievement and inequality.

2. Key factors hindering the development of an equal education system

So far, we have given an account of the current standing of the education system in England and its inherent difficulties with social inequality. This system is not, and has never been, fully 'comprehensive', as the title of this paper indicates. This is important because the social policy failure to develop a comprehensive system in England is closely linked with the increasing levels of stratification within the system.

Legacy thinking about how schooling should be arranged in English Society has had a strong influence on the current system. Nineteenth century attitudes to different types of schooling being required for different types of children, solely based on intellectual capacity was the predominant attitude when policy makers introduced free secondary education through the 1944 Education Act. Between 1944 and 1965 a selective tripartite system existed in England based on grammar schools for the 'brightest' 20 per cent (accessed through a later discredited entrance examination) and secondary modern or technical schooling for the rest. This meant it was still common for pupils to leave school at 15 and later 16 without any certification. Much was made in this new system that the schools - though different - would be held in a 'parity of esteem' but this did not match the reality and researchers established at an early stage that the grammar schools were dominated by the higher social classes (Floud *et al.*, 1956). Unequal distribution of resources meant though that even middle class children were 'disadvantaged' in some geographical areas because the supply of grammar schools were asymmetrically distributed across England and the educational quality in secondary modern schools was compromised by less well qualified and poorly paid teaching staff and a restricted curriculum (Walford, 1994).

In the Labour Party government circles of the 1940s, there was firm resistance to the kind of 'common school', advocated by left-leaning Labour Members of Parliament, the teaching unions, educationalists and some parents. A limited view of equality existed at government level with the emphasis on equality of opportunity based on meritocratic principles. Two decades later when comprehensive education was introduced in England in 1965, government ministers did not seek a rapid replacement of the existing system. Rather than introduce formal legislation on such a fundamental change, the Labour Secretary of State for Education and Science, Anthony Crosland, took the tactical but timid decision to issue a Departmental Circular 10/65 requesting local education authorities to 'submit

plans' to move towards comprehensive education, stating that he did not intend to 'seek to impose destructive or precipitate changes on existing schools' (quoted in Simon, 1991: 280). In critiquing the content of Circular 10/65, Abraham (1995: 2) rejected the received opinion that it represented the first 'explicit' attempt of a Labour government to define what a comprehensive system should look like. Instead he concluded the Circular was limited to 'prescriptions for certain organisational arrangements' and agreed with Ball (1981) who had concluded that no positive educational aims had been put forward for this new system.

While some enthusiastic local education authorities, mainly but by no means exclusively Labour-controlled, moved quickly to implement various versions of a comprehensive school system, a significant minority took many years to introduce comprehensive schools and kept their selective system of grammar schools running in parallel. In 1970 Margaret Thatcher became the new Conservative government's Secretary of State for Education and Science, and one of her early actions was to release Circular 10/70, which 'neither demanded a return to selective systems nor prohibited the development of comprehensive schemes' but permitted 'local authorities to retain existing selective systems and to draw back from comprehensive reorganisation' (Simon, 1991: 408). While this did not stop the momentum for comprehensive education, it allowed the continued presence of selective practices, and as a result, a fully comprehensive system has never been implemented in England. In assessing the comprehensive experiment, Benn and Chitty (1996: 468) captures the impact of these political policy machinations:

«There is a severe and debilitating contradiction at the heart of the majority's education over the past thirty years in Britain. On the one hand, governments were ostensibly supporting the comprehensive principle to which most schools and colleges were becoming committed; while at the same time, they were failing to support it adequately or working hard to undermine its principles and practices, and, in some cases, making it clear that they had no confidence in an education that did not pre-judge an individual's worth or facilitate an escalation of enclaves for the favoured few».

Thirty years after comprehensive schooling was introduced, over 90% of state schools were nominally comprehensive but political leaders in both the Labour and Conservative parties expressed public dissatisfaction about academic standards in these schools. This ultimately paved the way for the 1988 Education Reform Act when the Conservative government introduced quasi-market reforms promising that increased competition between schools and enhanced diversity in provision would provide better choices for parents and also raise standards. A centralised national curriculum and inspection system was introduced to counter the perception, common across all the leadership sections of the parliamentary political parties, that the local education authorities, the teaching unions and educational establishment more broadly were too dominant in their influence. Most controversially, increased freedoms were offered to schools to leave the local education authority system altogether, through the introduction of new school types funded directly by central government (Maclure, 1989). By the time that the Conservative government was defeated in 1997 after three terms and 18 years in office, 19% of secondary schools had 'opted out' of local education authority control.

With a policy to improve urban schools in deprived areas, the New Labour Government elected in 1997 built on the Conservative idea of schools opting out of local authority control and introduced 'Academy Schools' in 2000. These schools were to be run by sponsors from industry; bringing, it was thought, much needed vigour, creativity and business-like qualities into play to remedy the perceived low aspirations of the public sector approach. The scheme proved controversial as large tranches of funding were moved to this initia-

tive. There were problems with the sponsors and in the hurry to get results in the early stages of the programme, not all schools were placed in deprived areas (National Audit Office, 2010). The new Coalition government elected in 2010 built on these reforms through the 2010 Academies Act which dramatically accelerated the spread of Academy Schools and introduced the idea of Free Schools, which could be set up by groups of parents or others if they felt their local school provision was inadequate. Extra funding and a programme of 'forced conversions' for 'failing schools' resulted in the most significant change in accountability for the running of secondary education provision in England and figures from the Department for Education released in February 2014 indicated that 55% of secondary schools are now in this category and 'controlled' from central government.

Space is too limited to provide a full explanation of the significance of the local authority system in the management of England's state schools but the main points to emphasise relevant to this paper are as follows: when the 1944 Education Act was implemented, the local authorities were seen as central agencies in ensuring the efficient provision of schools through a democratically accountable system of governance. If citizens were not satisfied with the way their local authority was running school services or any other public service, the political party running the authority could be voted out of office at the next election. From Margaret Thatcher's time onwards, the power of local authorities has been truncated and their central role in managing school resources and processes, including admissions, has been systematically reduced. With over half of England's secondary schools now outside the orbit of the local authorities in which they are situated, they now have individual control of their own admissions, curriculum and teacher recruitment and are accountable as individual entities to the Secretary of State for Education. In the case of admissions, which will be discussed in the next paragraph, this has resulted in a departure from a 'managed' system based on accountability to a system run on choice and competition, which is considerably less transparent (Feintuck and Stevens, 2013).

Equality of opportunity at its most basic level and any hope of developing a school system based on egalitarian principles has been hindered by the weakness of the policies and practices concerning admission to state secondary schools. The social geography of the UK is stratified in terms of residential patterns and England's school system mirrors this stratification. Schools are not just different from one another; there are schools, which are seen as 'better' and schools, which are seen as 'worse'. Those with financial, social and cultural capital use this knowledge to their advantage to secure what is, in their view, the best education for their children. For some, this involves extreme measures like moving to a different catchment area, claiming to have religious beliefs in order to qualify for particular faith-based schools or paying private tutors to coach their child to pass grammar school entrance exams. Researchers have identified a significant class bias in operation. For instance, Gewirtz *et al.* (1995: 32-37) found that parents ranged from 'unskilled' to 'expert' in their capabilities when applying for admission for their children to secondary school and that this correlated closely to social class levels. West *et al.* (2003) found evidence that 'selection by stealth' was happening in a wide range of school types (including comprehensives) and West *et al.* (2004) concluded that *systematic* selection was occurring within comprehensive schools. The level of social segregation taking place within the state school sector is considerable with the leading 500 'comprehensive' schools accepting pupils who are eligible for free school meals (an indicator of social deprivation) that is less than half that of the national average (Sutton Trust, 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the education system in England has been built on segregation and stratification and that educational policy initiatives from 1944 until the present day have reinforced these aspects. We have also argued that a policy preoccupation with creating new types of school with more freedom and greater independence in the hope that this would improve educational attainment and offer better opportunities for all pupils has not delivered on its promise. In fact, it has instead created a complex system of differentiation where the future destiny of a child is still determined by the background of their parents. As Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust commented in the introduction of a recent research report:

«The best schools in England come in three guises. There are world-class independent schools for the small minority of 7% who can afford the fees. There are still 164 selective grammar schools in the country and there are a group of comprehensive schools with non-selective admissions policies, most of which are socially exclusive because of the neighbourhoods or faith communities they serve. Who gets admitted to these schools matters because they are the ones most likely to attend the best universities and most likely to succeed in the top professions. These schools open the door to social mobility. Yet, the bottom line is that how good a school you go to depends on your parents' income» (Sutton Trust, 2013: 3).

If the current Coalition Government wants to combat educational inequality, it might consider addressing the stratification that is inherent within the English education system and reflect on how policies of school diversity and competition continue to create unintended and undesirable consequences for pupils who are unable to access the best schools in England.

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