

The flight from complexity

We are entering a period of deep reaction. One of the mainsprings of the vote to leave the EU was a mythical pre-EU phase of our country's existence, when there was no mass immigration, when other countries didn't impinge on our freedom of decision-making, and when British values were clear and unsullied. It's hard to know exactly when this period was meant to be, because it has never existed. But 'it was better before' was the explicit, if not articulate, reason given by many for their Brexit sentiment.

Although the age of grammar schools did exist, the motivation behind their phoenix-like resurrection—to go back to a mythical era when an educational gold standard operated—is similar. Then, the middle classes had educational institutions that allowed a professional and managerial class to entrench their wealth and power, and allowed a few bright working-class children to move up through the ranks.

Jeremy Corbyn, whose election to the leadership of the Labour party seems further evidence of this search for simple solutions, has an equally naïve opposition to grammar schools, as if a simple re-statement of the old system of comprehensive schools is enough to resolve all our educational issues.

The flight from complexity is also a flight from evidence. It was already present in the Gove administration, with its desire for a more fact-based curriculum and school standards tied to traditional academic subjects within the reactionary—in the non-pejorative sense of the word—EBacc.

There was absolutely no research offered to suggest this policy was either good for children's intellectual development or what the country's economy needed. As Professor Carey Philpott points out in this issue, the sudden switch back to supporting grammar schools is a final nail in the coffin of any notion of the primacy of evidence in education decision-making. Values and ideology are the new primary paradigm.

Despite having totally different views about the specific policy of grammar schools, the regime of Gove and Nicky Morgan sat well within this values and ideology paradigm, without any evidence base for their policies ever even being mentioned. It is a little risible, then, to now see Nicky Morgan telling off the Prime Minister for putting forward her untested preferences as education policy. And Corbyn, despite his radically different policies that suit his ideological framework, also sits within this paradigm.

The evidence from history is illuminating. Professor David Jesson of York University points out in his interesting paper, 'The Creation, Development and Present State of Grammar Schools in England', that the establishment of grammar schools as state-funded secondary schools—with secondary moderns and technical colleges—was a progressive development on what went before.¹ Each of the three parts of the system were supposed to be equal in status.

Sadly, this equality of status never became a reality. The prior elitist values and image of the fee-paying grammar schools, the selection process to get into them and the scarcity of places created a top tier. This was not surprising: underpinning the whole tri-partite system was the 'evidence' of psychologist Burt, who claimed innate intelligence was lower among working-class children. The 1944 Education Act's wish for equality of status was dead before the ink on the statute books was dry.

We now know that 'evidence' about classes and race is always highly dubious, and cultural and socio-economic factors are much more important. We are beginning to know much more about what type of education can develop children's potential and, something that has rarely been done before, we are beginning to address some issues of what the economy requires from our education system with University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools, and serious vocational courses within mainstream schools. Schools for academic children, whatever they are called, have a role in this response.

We also know that the old monolithic comprehensivisation movement under the sixties failed to achieve much of this. Balkanised though our current education system is, it does give us the basis for much more sustained research about what would be best for our children and the country. The evidence from now and the past is that support for selective education is a value judgement that obstructs rational judgement.

One final element of political complexity to consider is this: Jesson points out that it was the Conservative shires that led the flight from selective education in the sixties. Labour just generalised a spreading movement.

References

1. Jesson, D. (2013) The Creation, Development And Present State Of Grammar Schools In England. [online] Available at: suttontrust.com/researcharchive/creation-development-present-state-grammar-schools-england [Accessed 3 October 2016].