

CEPaLS 15: The real story about Grammar Schools.

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This text was original posted on my Tumblr blog on 13th April 2017. The blog has now been deleted and I am presenting this as a CEPaLS paper.

A really interesting moment this morning on BBC Breakfast when Charlie Stayt asked Justine Greening, Secretary of State for Education, why so much money was being invested in grammar schools, when the vast majority of families and children do not and will never gain access to them. In fact, he pointed out that currently schools are facing budget cuts with begging letters home to parents asking for supplementary funds so that they can keep basic education services running. Justine Greening could not directly answer such valid and important questions. She is struggling to justify the grammar school expansion policy of the May government, but at the same time much symbolic investment has been made by the front bench and No. 10. Lets consider what is going on.

The lack of evidence for the expansion of grammar schools is clear (see blog 7th January 2017 *The ultimate privatization: the case of grammar schools*, now CEPaLS 11) and there is a cross party consensus against the move in the House of Commons. But the policy just keeps rolling out, with current policy tweaking taking place to secure access to grammar schools by 'ordinary families'. See this report:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-39584000>

Greening is trying to handle the evidence that shows that in a competitive education market it is the middle classes who make 'choice' work for them. We know that schools choose children, but the middle classes have the resources to enable the admissions codes and selection processes to work for them. So whatever Greening is doing to adjust the 'new' grammar schools it is flimflam, and a diversion from what is really going on. So lets look at that.

I want to begin the uncovering of the real story about what is going on with Theresa May's 'great meritocracy' speech in October 2016:

“And this is really important. Because I don't just want to see more school places but more good school places. And I don't just want to see more new schools, but more good new schools that each in their way contribute to a diversity of provision that caters to the needs and abilities of each individual child, whoever they are and wherever they are from”.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech>

At the heart of this conservatism is the belief in private education – it is a private matter for the person and the family. Integral to this are the private understandings of children and families about “needs and abilities”, and what this means for aspirations. So schools choose children based on shaping and meeting needs and capabilities – so the 7% of schools that charge fees are selling a product that speaks to the idea and reality of needs and capability identification. Combined with wealth (and hence social, cultural and political status), the fee paying school controls intake through various forms of selection including testing. For Conservatives the idea and reality of the common school (and the successful common school!) that serve the majority of children and families is not acceptable. And so from the 1980s onwards we have seen schools handed over to private interests (corporate, faith, philanthropists) with a range of ways in which the 93% are enabled to mimic the 7%. Hence the expansion of notions of 'choice' of school places for all parents. We know that choice is a myth that only a few can gain advantage from, and the grammar schools are just one more way of enabling successful common schools

to be destroyed in the name of segregate options and choices. Now why are the conservatives in favour of segregation?

I have just finished reading Clyde Chitty's book: *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education* (2007, Continuum) where important insights are provided. Chitty quotes Quintin Hogg attacking Labour's support for comprehensivisation in the House of Commons:

"I can assure Hon. Members opposite that if they would go to study what is now being done in good secondary modern schools, they would not find a lot of pupils biting their nails in frustration because they had failed the eleven-plus. The pleasant noise of banging metal and sawing wood would greet their ears, and a smell of cooking with rather expensive equipment would come out of the front door to greet them. They would find that these boys and girls were getting an education tailor-made to their desires, their bents and their requirements... I am not prepared to admit that the party opposite has done a good service to education, or to the children of this country, by attacking that form of school, or seeking to denigrate it" (Hansard, House of Commons, Vol. 705, Cols 423-424, 21 January 1965) (Quoted by Chitty 2007 pp20-21).

Underpinning this statement is a clear understanding of knowing your place, and having needs and aspirations that can be accurately identified and provided for. We know that this is not possible – it was not possible then and it is not possible now. At the time when Hogg was speaking my brother was hitting metal and sawing wood in a secondary modern school, and I was being prepared to cook (and sew) at the same school. By 1965 my brother had failed the 11+ and I was on track to fail it in 1969. A problem for Hogg: our generations did get frustrated at having the wrong curriculum to meet our academic education needs, and in fact we have both exceeded the needs and capabilities that the 11+ in the 1960s determined for us.

But there is something else underpinning this. It is the idea that not all children need or are capable of education. Hogg is really talking about training and preparation rather than education. Hence we should be content that mass education is misplaced, with huge misinvestment in buildings, teachers and learning resources.

There is something even more important underpinning Hogg's position. Chitty (2007) provides detailed and convincing evidence about a range of beliefs that are still with us today:

1. There is a fear of mass education – educating all children is dangerous because it enables people who should know their place to challenge the entitlements of those who are deserving of a privileged place. The grammar schools enable a few middle class families to restore and/or retain their position, but they do not enable social mobility in the way that May and Green assert.
2. There is a belief in eugenic ideas – inheritance of innate intelligence can be measured and used through intelligence testing. Innate intelligence is directly related to social class and race. The 11+ creates more failures for working class children because they are not intelligent enough to pass or benefit from a grammar school education. The grammar schools are built on and sustain eugenic ideas and practices.

All that May is saying in her 'meritocracy' speech is that we can measure you and determine if you are suitable for social mobility. Such social mobility is an illusion as it is located in a complex but simple notion of public status based on private heredity. Fixed and predetermined intelligence means that the social, political, economic and cultural structures are therefore fixed.

Grammar schools are premised on a denial of what Chitty (2007) calls "the belief in human educability", and he goes on to argue: "it is only when we dismantle all the structures rooted in the fallacy of fixed ability or potential that we will have a truly effective state education system" (p131).

Comprehensive schools have been too successful because they generate people like me: educated 'outsiders' who demonstrate the value of mass education in the common school. The country is full of us.

If you wish to reference this paper:

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