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Comprehensive Schools Are Not Enough: The Challenge of Education Policy for the Left

[Professor Danny Dorling](#) 11/11/16

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Following on from discussions at our 2016 conference, we asked key thinkers to summarise their thoughts on some of the most important issues facing Britain today. Most of us are educated at state schools in the UK, and the quality of our education system is an issue that many feel passionately about, particularly as proposals to bring back grammar schools threaten to further entrench inequality. Professor Danny Dorling spoke in our education and schools session at the Class Conference on his vision for an overhaul of our education system, and we asked him to expand on his contribution here.

The education system in the UK is in crisis. However, the left needs to recognize that simply defending comprehensive education is not enough: our current system of allocation to state schools by area is deeply problematic. The publication of school league tables that started in the early 1990s led to small differences in outcome by schools being magnified into large differences by 2016. Many of those parents who could afford 'school choice' bought homes or rented in areas where schools were doing slightly better than average. Poorer families were subsequently priced out of the catchment areas of those schools, and what had started as a small difference in school outcomes grew into a chasm, dividing up many towns and cities.

One social problem led to another. Parents growing increasingly anxious about educational outcomes helped to fuel the speculative bubble in housing prices in the south east of England and further afield. Importantly, not publishing school league tables would be too little on its own to reverse the harm that has been done by the school choice that the comprehensive system allows for, and the spatial divides that have grown over time between our children.

Encouraging schools to compete with each other further exacerbated the problem, along with the foundation of academies and free schools. The left needs new ideas as radical as comprehensive education was when it was first envisaged. It needs to recognize how housing, growing economic inequality and education are linked, not just through who can live in each catchment area, but in the high turnover of young teachers in the south of England.

We need to begin to change how we govern our schools and amalgamate their management so that teachers can work on more than one school site, and economies of scale can be used to make it more rational for upper middle class parents not to use the private sector. We need our universities to compete less with one another, and work more closely with the communities in which they are based. So how can we begin to achieve this?

We need to look to models that could become the mainstream of the future. Long before the comprehensive movement was a movement, there were a few comprehensive schools. Similarly today, long before there is any movement for a

co-operative ethos in the UK education system, there are already 800 co-operative state schools in the UK up and running. Notably, they are beginning to organise regionally, with more plans in place for extending this in 2017.

What we do not yet have is a co-operative model in a large town or small city in which all state schools work together in a way that it makes less and less sense for parents to worry about the school catchment area they live in, and less and less sense for those who could afford to go private not to use the state system.

A financial crisis is often a large part of the impetus for progressive social change. The National Health Service was introduced in part because the middle class could no longer afford a private doctor by the 1930s. Comprehensive schools were so popular in the 1970s in part because the middle class could increasingly not afford to use the private sector for their children who failed the 11 plus.

We too are in the middle of a financial crisis. State schools may, out of necessity, have to begin to share resources, science labs, language teachers, and sports fields. Why not then share the same senior management team too? And why not make our cities safer to cycle around, so that we are happier with the idea of secondary school children moving between different school sites or going to different sites on different days?

For all this to work, we need to adopt a more co-operative model of education. We need to realize that the school which achieves the best GCSE results in the city is not an 'outstanding school', but almost always the school with the most expensive catchment area. We need to understand that children who are very good at passing exams are not necessarily very good at anything other than passing exams. Britain needs a well-rounded workforce in the future, not a set of adults trained in exam technique, or made to feel inadequate because they were a problem for their school.

This blog is a summary of a speech later made on the 15th – transcript below...

- **Policy areas:** [Education](#)
- **Projects:** [Class Conference 2016 | Britain at a Crossroads: finding the progressive path](#)
- **Tags:** [co-operative](#), [comprehensive schools](#), [education](#)

15th Caroline Benn Lecture: The Education Shuffle – what will the next two steps forward be?

[Innovation in Education Lecture](#) by Danny Dorling given in Committee Room 10, House of Commons, London, November 15th, 2016

- Let's start with the conclusion of the March 2016 final report of the [Compass Inquiry into a New System of Education](#):
“The big problem is this – how small our education system has become. By small we mean narrow, restrictive and lacking in ambition and imagination. For both learners and teachers the space in the system is claustrophobic and does not allow people to stretch and expand, to push and be pulled, to know a life without limits. Schools have become factories of limited learning to fit with one dominant view of what it means to be human – the worker–consumer in the competitive global economic race at a time when for so many work no longer pays enough to live by – let alone provide work that allows us to flourish. It is small in the sense that too much of it is selfish and self-serving at a time when success increasingly comes from collaboration and cooperation. It forces us to look down at short horizons, not up at the vast landscapes of what a good society could be like.”
- In 2005 [Stuart Hall](#) wrote about New Labour's “double-shuffle”, the disingenuous way in which Tony Blair's governments had managed to take us backwards while claiming to be making progress. The double-shuffle occurred partly out of a lack of bold proposals to take two steps forward again. Hall bemoaned that there had been no “re-invention of the state education system”. The first academy schools, like the first university student fees (for £1000 and then £3000 a year), simply made worse to come possible. Hall was explaining that we often step backwards before taking two steps forwards.
- Suppose we decide that no school should be a ‘sink’ school; that state education in the four countries of the UK should be at least as good the average on the European mainland; so good that fewer and fewer upper-middle class parents choose to pay for private schools and private tuition; suppose we decided that fewer lower-working class pupils will be excluded from our schools each year; suppose we recognised that public support for

grammar schools in England is a call for help, just as the Brexit vote was a call for help – what would we do?

- Comprehensives schools improved our lives. The evidence that they are better for our children and for us is [overwhelming](#). This is why 60 organisations including the Royal Society of Arts and Commerce put their names to a [letter in The Times](#) in October pleading for the ban on new grammar schools to remain. So why (in the face of such overwhelming expert advice) do so many of the public, some government ministers, and the prime minister want to press ahead with new grammars?
- It is possible to select a sub-set of grammar schools and to suggest that the minority of children from poorer backgrounds who attend that small set of grammar schools [do go on to get better GCSE results](#), but that does not provide evidence that the grammar school model is good in general. It also does not question the English orthodoxy that it is always better to get higher grades in exams. If we needed lots of adult who were especially skilled at exam technique it would be – but that is not what we lack as a country!
- Introducing a grammar school into an area does not just harm schooling in that immediate district [but also in neighbouring areas](#). Despite this, more people are in favour of creating new grammar schools (38%) than would be in favour of ending selection in those that still exist (23%). Among those who attended grammar schools 61% would [like to see more being built](#). Thus it is the old who are most in favour of selection in education.
- The argument for grammar schools is very similar to the argument for Brexit. It is about people wanting something better than what they currently have and believing that somehow a return to the past will make things better, that the “experts” are not to be believed, and that the elderly know best. However it is also an argument against just carrying on as we are, and an argument against the massive rise in economic inequality of recent decades that has resulted in school [selection by house price](#).

- The majority of people in England do not want to defend 1970s comprehensive schooling, just as they don't want to defend 1970s council housing, or having a health service treating elderly people as we did in the 1970s. People want something better than what is currently on offer. They are also not all stupid enough to believe that their children will all pass the 11 plus although unfortunately, a little like those Americans voting for Trump, the rise in individualism in the UK has [harmed our collective thinking](#).
- Because our education system is poor, fewer of us understand how ability, luck and chance work as compared to our counterparts in most other European countries – by age 24 we are worse at maths, at problem solving and at literacy as compared to most of the young adults in Europe. People of my age (48) or older who are now in positions of power, were far more often educated away from children of a 'lower' class than them. Our current Prime Minister, her chief advisor, the majority of older people whose views are well aired – were not able to benefit from a comprehensive education because one was not available where and when they grew up.
- Comprehensive education has improved so much since its widespread inception that today, in the majority of areas where it exists; it makes little sense to send a child to a private school. Often the calculations behind that decision are based on past probabilities of both university entry and what a graduate wage might be. Had I gone to the nearest elite private school to my home in the 1970s, I would have been over ten times more likely to go to university. Back then the gamble may have made sense if you were not concerned with segregating your child. Today, if you send your child to an elite private school they will most probably fail to get into the university they are told they should aim for, and will then apply to a small number of universities where they think they might feel safe, because they have become so afraid of the children they almost never meet.
- Today the educational differences in life chances between children by class are orders of magnitude lower than they were in my childhood; but that does not mean that our schooling is good – just that it is better than it was

– and that non-graduate careers now appear far more rare and more precarious. Our schools need to be feeding children into a different society, but we also need different schools to what we currently have, if we are to become that different society.

- People do not want their child to have to attend a local comprehensive that is severely underfunded following years of cuts hidden under the pretence of having “[ring-fenced education](#)”. They do not want their child to be assigned to the one in which almost all the teachers are very young because staff turnover is so high, in which hardly any children have middle class parents – the school which those “in the know” avoid.
- People may also not want their normal child to be forced to attend an average comprehensive, an [exam factory](#) in which every C and B that can be squeezed out of them will be squeezed out of them, in which not going on to university is categorized as failure. It is not impossible that some parents (and probably more grandparents) see the return of grammar schools as an opportunity to have more secondary moderns for the bulk of children who are bored with being continually pushed along a tedious national curriculum path, given so much homework, and treated as such a problem for “the school”.
- Just like Brexit, the offer currently on the table is ‘business as usual’ or ‘change’. Business as usual is now a complex competing set of schools, most often academies controlled by a dubious board of trustees often dominated by ‘business-people’ (and who chose them?) Business as usual already includes selection at age 16 because academies can and do refuse to accept pupils who do not score high enough GCSE marks across a very wide range of subjects.
- It is the market that decides what makes a child’s grades high enough for them to be able to stay in their academy school at age 16. The child and their parents find out if they are winners on the day the GCSE results are released. If their results are not good enough they have just a few days to let the educational market in their town find alternative provision for the child – unless they were persuaded to jump earlier to a vocational

‘university’ technical college at age 14 from which they are quite unlikely to go on to university – so why put the word ‘university’ [in their title](#)?

- Different children need different challenges at different ages. Other countries understand this, but that does not mean having to be in very different schools from each other. What has not been put on the table is an alternative to ‘business as usual’ which is not a return to the past. Exactly the same mistake was made when the electorate were given a ‘remain’ or ‘leave’ choice over the EU.
- Labour offer the 1970s (defend comprehensives) the Tories offer the 1950s (grammars and ‘out of Europe’). Teachers want stability, and a liveable workload. Parents want some certainty and for their children. Children want to go to school with their friends and be able to stay at school if they like their school. They are shaped by how we treat them and often grow up to think that the way they were educated was good – because they know no other way. But that is, of course, the same of all of us – we only have one childhood. And this is why education matters so much and why the market cannot work in education. Markets only work by repeated failure.
- The UK has historically made serious changes to public service provision when it has been forced to do so. The NHS was introduced in 1948 partly because the middle class could not longer afford private doctors fees in the 1930s. Comprehensives schools were introduced across most of the country in the 1970s partly because at a time a very high economic equality the upper middle class could not longer afford to pay for private education if their children failed the 11 plus. We are facing another financial crisis today. Not just as a result of a falling pound, but because of the long-term fall-out of the 2008 financial crash.
- Selective education is inefficient and hence expensive. Private schools are incredibly expensive (a third of our secondary spending goes on them). Academy schools and chains are also expensive, prone to [allegations of corruption and paternalism](#) because of how they are governed, and to the negative effects of short-term competition to increase grades.

- Children are served best in countries such as Finland where there is no equivalent of Ofsted, no league tables, and only a small random sample of pupils' work is occasionally tested to monitor school performance (rather than pupil performance). We are a long way away from achieving anything like the success of the [Finnish model of education](#), but how could we begin to move towards it, and could we begin to do so while also saving money?
- British school senior management teams are large and expensive. Do two neighbouring schools really need two separate senior management teams or could one team do a better job than two, with the ability to move teachers and eventually pupils between sites. If we were to remove competition between neighbouring schools that were geographically close to each other in Britain we could begin to reduce the stigma built up over decades between many of our local schools. That stigma only began to grow to be significant with the widespread publication of school league tables in the 1990s.
- If the state schools in a small town were combined under [one governing body](#) then only the town as a whole would be ranked. And when catchments began to become less meaningful, the housing price differentials across a town should fall. To achieve this, as the UK funding crisis depends, we need to think of the positives of combining the management of pairs of schools. The different sites can keep their own names, but the school slowly becomes the school of the borough, of the town, just as all the hospitals in a town are often run by a single NHS administration. Such changes may be resisted while housing prices in rich quarters remain high, but they cannot remain high forever – and they are mostly only now as high as they are because we have stoked up such fears over schools.
- Eventually we should aim to fund our state schools as well as they are funded in Finland – per child, but that is a long-term aspiration. In the short-term, unless we know what it is we want – new Finnish cooperation rather than old-English competition – we stand little chance of getting there, and a good chance of moving back to the bad old days of selection. You might think such cooperation can never happen. However there are

already 800 co-operative schools in the UK [up and running today](#). And they are beginning to organise regionally with more [plans in place for 2017](#).

- The first comprehensive school was up and running long before the comprehensive movement became mainstream. The first co-operative schools are already here – now we need to explain again and again why co-operation trumps competition in education.
- Almost any fool can be taught to be awarded an A* if enough resource is thrown at them. We need children who become adults who understand that there is so much more to learning than simply achieving high grades in an exam.
- The most [recent and comprehensive study](#) of a cohort of children in England concluded: “Eliminating social class inequalities in educational achievement thus requires the elimination of social class differences in school effectiveness.”
- The alternative, described 58 years ago, is Michael Young’s 1958 nightmare vision of a 2033 meritocracy in which he quipped that a few ‘gifted’ children from the labouring classes could be extracted from the masses so that: “No longer is it necessary to debase standards by attempting to extend a higher civilisation to the children of the lower classes”
- If we really wanted a ‘higher civilisation’ to result from how we educate, then we would remember these warnings from when we were more economically equal, and also what Richard Tawney wrote almost a century ago when we were beginning to work towards greater quality in education”
- “The fundamental obstacle in the way of education in England is simple. It is that education is a spiritual activity, much of which is not commercially profitable, and that the prevailing temper of Englishmen is to regard as most important that which is commercially profitable, and of only inferior importance that which is not. ... We should provide, not merely, as

hitherto, for a small minority, but for all the nations son's and daughters, an education generous, inspiring and humane”

- Our current education system is not generous – we spend so little and segregate so much compared to other countries. It is not inspiring – teachers are forced to teach a set curriculum and to concentrate on exams constantly tinkered with by politicians thinking of their own leadership ambitions and trying to demonstrate their own apparent prowess. And our education is not humane – children are units, products in a model of competition aimed at producing a docile unimaginative workforce. However, our education system is more human than it was when I was a child, when it was legal to beat children in schools. What do we do today that we will look back on with horror in a generation's time?
- All segregation harms the imagination, children do not emerge from the most expensive of private schools with enquiring minds today, but instead are fine tuned to try to second guess exam questions., because the private schools are forced to compete by exam grade. And the private sector already has many secondary moderns, private schools for children who fail the entrance exams of others schools. What kind of an education is that?
- We need a cooperative, collaborative comprehensive system. We need to move towards it slowly, area-by-area, funding crisis by funding crisis. We need fewer examinations and to treat those at age 16 as ‘within school tests’. We need fewer senior management teams and we need governing bodies on which sit teachers and parents and children, not ones dominated by local worthies and accountants.
- I'll leave the last word to [Caroline Benn](#): “Once a sound and universal comprehensive system has been established for everyone from 11 to 18, a fractional percentage of selective schools or a hangover sector for the rich is not necessarily alarming.”

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