

The Creation, Development and Present State of Grammar Schools in England

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1. An historical account of the development of Grammar schools

Competitive 'Selection' for Grammar school education had long been seen as a natural part of the process by which schooling should be organised and scarce resources applied to support the maintenance of an administrative elite.

Whilst Grammar Schools have been a feature of the English education system at least since the time of Henry VIII, their emergence as an integral part of a fully-funded state compulsory education system offering 'Secondary Education for All' only arose as a consequence of the 1944 Education Act which enshrined the role of selection as its principal instrument.

The idea that each child had a fixed level of 'innate intelligence' which could be measured and presented as an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score was widely promoted, most notably by psychologist Cyril Burt, who did more than anyone to advocate the widespread use of IQ tests 'for the purpose of pinning permanent labels on schoolchildren at the age of eleven' (Chitty, 2007). Burt provided much of the theory on which the influential Hadow Reports of the 1930's were based and wielded enormous influence over many years – and, through the 1938 Spens Report¹ contributed to the structure of the secondary education system that emerged in the wake of the 1944 Education Act².

Early development of state-funded Grammar schools

The Education Act of 1902 had set up Local Education Authorities to provide 'universal **elementary** education' up to the age of 14 but which could also include the provision of 'secondary' schools for bright children. 'Secondary education' was provided for a minority of 'able' pupils in often newly created Grammar Schools. This was distinct from the 'elementary education' provided for all other state-funded pupils. These Grammar Schools, like their independent counterparts, charged fees for the pupils they educated. However, the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act of 1907 required that all grant-aided 'secondary schools' provide at least 25% of their places as free scholarships to pupils from public elementary schools. Over the period from 1913 to 1937, the proportion of 'free places' in secondary schools rose from around one third to just

¹ Ministry of Education (1938) *Report of the Consultative Committee on Secondary Education with special reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools* London.

² (Gillard D (2008) *Us and Them: a history of pupil grouping policies in England's schools* see: www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/27grouping.html)

under one half. There were, however, substantial regional differences in provision and take-up and, more importantly, between different social classes. Little and Westergaard's 1964 paper³ 'showed that over the period from the early 1900's, whilst overall attendance at Grammar schools almost doubled, children admitted from semi-skilled and unskilled worker parental backgrounds increased from around 1% to 10%.

Table 1.1: Social Class differentiation in admissions to Grammar schools

Father's Occupation	Pre 1910	1910 - 19	1920 - 29	1930 - 39
Professional, managerial	37%	47%	52%	62%
Other non-manual	7%	13%	16%	20%
Semi-skilled or unskilled	1%	4%	7%	10%
All	12%	16%	18%	23%

Data source:

The rate of increase in this period for pupils from the lowest classes was higher than for those from other classes – however, the absolute gains were highest for those pupils with Professional and Managerial class parents, where admissions rose from just over one third to almost two thirds. Commenting on this Boudon (1973)⁴ reported that:

From the point of view of individuals, the probability of attending grammar school increased over this period much more rapidly for lower class than for higher class pupils. ... But from the point of view of social groups from the beginning to the end of the period under review 100 higher class people have been able to send an additional 25 pupils to Grammar schools whereas this additional number was just 9 for the lower group

This issue grew in importance over the next thirty years as the impact of reconstruction after World War II began to impact on society.

The changes in structure of education subsequently brought about by the 1944 Education Act had been articulated by The Spens Report⁵. This sought to bring a degree of order into what was an increasingly diverse and confusing range of public education provision by setting out a framework for its future development. Essentially this proposed a 'tripartite' system which provided for universal education within primary and secondary phases, the secondary phase of which was to be 'tripartite' in nature –

³ Little, A, and Westergaard, J. (1964) *Trends in Class Differentials in Educational Opportunity in England and Wales* British Journal of Sociology, 15 1964.

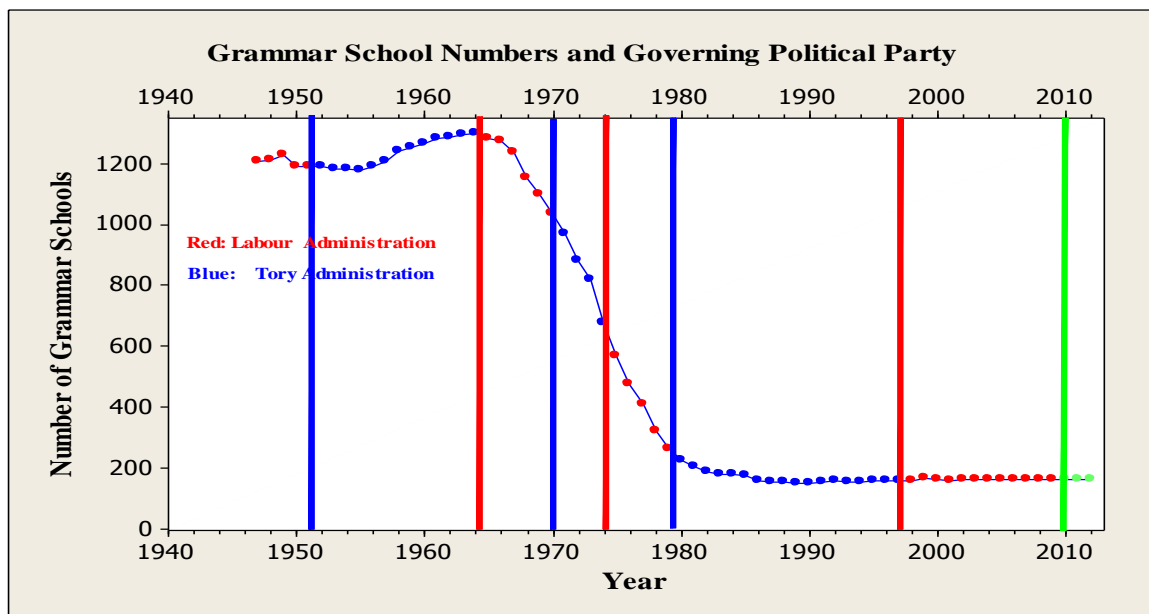
⁴ Boudon, R. (1973) *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality* New York John Wiley

⁵ Ibid.

comprising schools for 'academic' pupils, technical/vocational schools and 'modern' schools for the majority. The type of school a pupil attended was to be appropriate for their 'age, aptitude and ability' and there was to be 'parity of esteem' for each type of school. The full description of, and justification for the 'tripartite' system of secondary education was provided in the Ministry of Education Pamphlet 9 (published in 1947) under the title *'The New Secondary Education'*.

One remarkable aspect of the processes that led to the 1944 Act was the degree of political consensus about the way that secondary education should be organised. This is not to say that alternative voices were not raised, (mainly critical of the class bias of much of the system prior to 1944 and its contention that this was simply being reinforced by the provisions of the Act). However, from the mid 1940's to the mid 1960's, Grammar schools and 'selection tests' for entry ('the 11+') provided the key feature of the education of children in England (and Wales).

Figure 1.1 Number of Grammar Schools in existence after the 1944 Act along with the political composition of Government of the day



Data source: Bolton, P. (2013) *Grammar School Statistics*, House of Commons Library, SN/SG/1398, 20 May 2013.

Over a twenty year period the two main political parties administered a system which both created and maintained large numbers of Grammar schools. Immediately following the 1944 Act there were around 1200 state-maintained Grammar schools whilst, at its peak there were just fewer than 1300 in 1965.

In practice after the passing of the 1944 Education Act the intention that finding the 'right' school for each child should be 'uncontroversial' was, to a considerable extent, compromised. This was because, although the declared intention was for 'parity of

esteem', Grammar schools with (in many cases) their historical prestige and their necessarily exclusive selection procedures, came to be seen as the 'destination of choice' for children of aspirational families. Inevitably this was at the expense of other, possibly more appropriate, routes. 'Secondary Modern' schools were often only seen as a destination for those who had either 'failed' or not been 'put in for' Grammar school selection tests.

Floud, Halsey and Martin's 1953 ⁶ was one of the first analyses of the nature of existing secondary school provision which provided the first of a growing literature of critiques of selective education, identifying some of the factors which militated against 'working class' children gaining access to and succeeding in Grammar schools.

Amongst these, articulated by a range of contributors, were concerns:

- about the fundamental nature of the 'intelligence' on which the selection of pupils was supposed to be based;
- about the tests themselves which were claimed to be highly susceptible to coaching and 'training';
- about the additional 'discrimination' that appeared to operate to reduce the chances of relatively disadvantaged pupils attaining entry to Grammar schools; and, finally
- the apparent judgement of 'failure' experienced by those not selected and on those children's subsequent life-chances.

These, and other concerns relating to the age of buildings and the need for a major school rebuilding programmes fuelled an active search for alternatives to the tripartite system which was itself relatively politically 'neutral' in its early stages. One other feature which was of growing concern was the 'polarisation' of intakes to Grammar schools away from those from 'lower' class backgrounds.

The search for alternatives to 'selective education'

Initially this process of 'withdrawal' from a fully selective form of secondary school organisation throughout the 1950's was sporadic and developed independently of political allegiance. Leicestershire was one of the first LEAs to develop a systematic move towards a more 'comprehensive' admissions policy, where ALL pupils (in the 'experimental' areas) moved from their primary school to their local secondary school at age 11. This was a Shire County which had been Conservative controlled since its

⁶ Floud, J., Halsey, A., and Martin, F. (1953) *Educational Opportunity and Social Selection in England* in *Transactions of Second World Conference of Sociology*, Vol. II pp. 194 - 208

formation. In 1957 'The Leicestershire Experiment' was proposed following major parental dissatisfaction with the validity of the selection process, and its consequential attribution of 'failure' to the majority who were not selected.

What was proposed was that ALL pupils should move at age 11 to a local 'High' school where they studied a broad general curriculum. At age 14, those pupils who wished to engage in more detailed academic study (subject to 'guided parental choice') could transfer on to 'Upper' schools (which were in practice mainly the earlier re-named Grammar schools) where they entered two year GCE examination courses. Those who did not wish to do so remained within the High school until the then school leaving age of 15 – at that time there was no national final leaving examinations. So successful was the 'Experiment' that it was converted into The Leicestershire Plan in 1960 and subsequently rolled out across the whole County.

Elsewhere, across whole swathes of southern England 'comprehensive' reforms were taking place which 'abolished' Grammar schools in Counties such as Surrey, Hampshire, East and West Sussex, and Hertfordshire – and were clearly indicative of responses to the same kind of parental and other concerns articulated above.

A significant change in national political climate came about with the Labour Government of 1964 when the Minister for Education, Antony Crosland (appointed in January 1965), sought to assist a major *national* move away from a selective education system with the publication of DFE Circular (10/65) 'requesting LEAs to prepare plans for moving to a non-selective education system. Whilst it is tempting when viewing this from a later perspective to see this as solely a 'Labour Party policy', the background to this had already been widely established in a non-political context. Many LEAs of all political persuasions had by this time already begun moves to abolish selection in their areas. By 1964 an NFER Survey of secondary educational provision reported that over 70% of LEAs either had already established or were intending to establish some form of 'comprehensive' organisation of their schools.

Subsequently, and unevenly, the transformation of Grammar schools into non-selective schools proceeded apace with the final tally of just 160 or so being reached by the early 1980's.

Controversy and Questions about the role of 'social class'

The late 1970's and early 1980's saw the launch of a furious 'counter-attack' on the 'abolition' of Grammar schools (and other educational reforms) by The Black Paper writers and other right-wing commentators. Various groups like The Centre for Policy Studies; The National Council for Educational Standards and The Campaign for Real Education – (membership of which had many communalities) and who, with right-wing credentials, had somewhat privileged access to the Secretary of State created a platform for sustained attack on the 'comprehensive' principle and a call for a 'return to selective

education'. Possibly prompted by this furore DFES published two Statistical Bulletins (16/83 *School Standards and Spending; Statistical Analysis* and 13/84 *School Standards and Spending; Statistical Analysis: A Further Appreciation*) which utilised data relating to the 'social class composition' of LEAs to help 'explain' or 'account for' differences between their GCE performances. Some interpretations of the first of these publications suggested that any 'advantage' in performance shown by selective LEAs was related to more to their admission of higher social class pupils, than to any specific advantage due to 'selection'. This was strongly contested by the publication of 'Standards in English Schools'⁷ which claimed in contrast that a return to a fully selective education system would result in higher examination results generally. A more developed form of this argument was presented by the National Grammar Schools Association Report *'The Truth about Grammar Schools'* (2005)⁸ which argued that one important reason for re-introducing Grammar schools would be its (beneficial) effect on *'bright pupils from the working class'*.

Both the general issue (about the superiority of selective educational systems) and the specific (on the impact of this on bright but disadvantaged pupils) has been issues which have elicited substantial academic research and partisan publication over the past thirty years – but with no conclusive finding justifying one position over another. (One of the most exhaustive accounts of this is be found in The Sutton Trust Report: 'Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems'⁹).

What it has done, however, has been to fuel a debate about the role of Grammar schools in 'enhancing the life chances of bright, but less advantaged pupils' The contention of many right-wing critics of the 'abolition' of Grammar schools was not simply that Grammar schools provided an outstanding education but that they also provided a route out of social disadvantage for 'poor bright pupils'. This is one strand in the genesis of the current study, provoked although not initiated by David Willetts' speech to CBI (reported in The Guardian 16th May 2007):

*"Many people genuinely worried about social mobility, believe that grammar schools can transform the opportunities of bright children from poor areas. For those children from modest backgrounds who do get to grammar schools the benefits are enormous... But the trouble is that **the chances of a child from a poor background getting to a grammar school in those parts of the country where they do survive are shockingly low.** We must break free from the belief that academic selection is any longer the way to transform the life chances of bright poor kids... there is*

⁷ Marks, J., Cox, C., and Pomian-Szednicki, M. (1983) *Standards in English Schools* London NCES

⁸ Naylor, F. and Peach, R. *The Truth about Grammar Schools*, National Grammar Schools Association

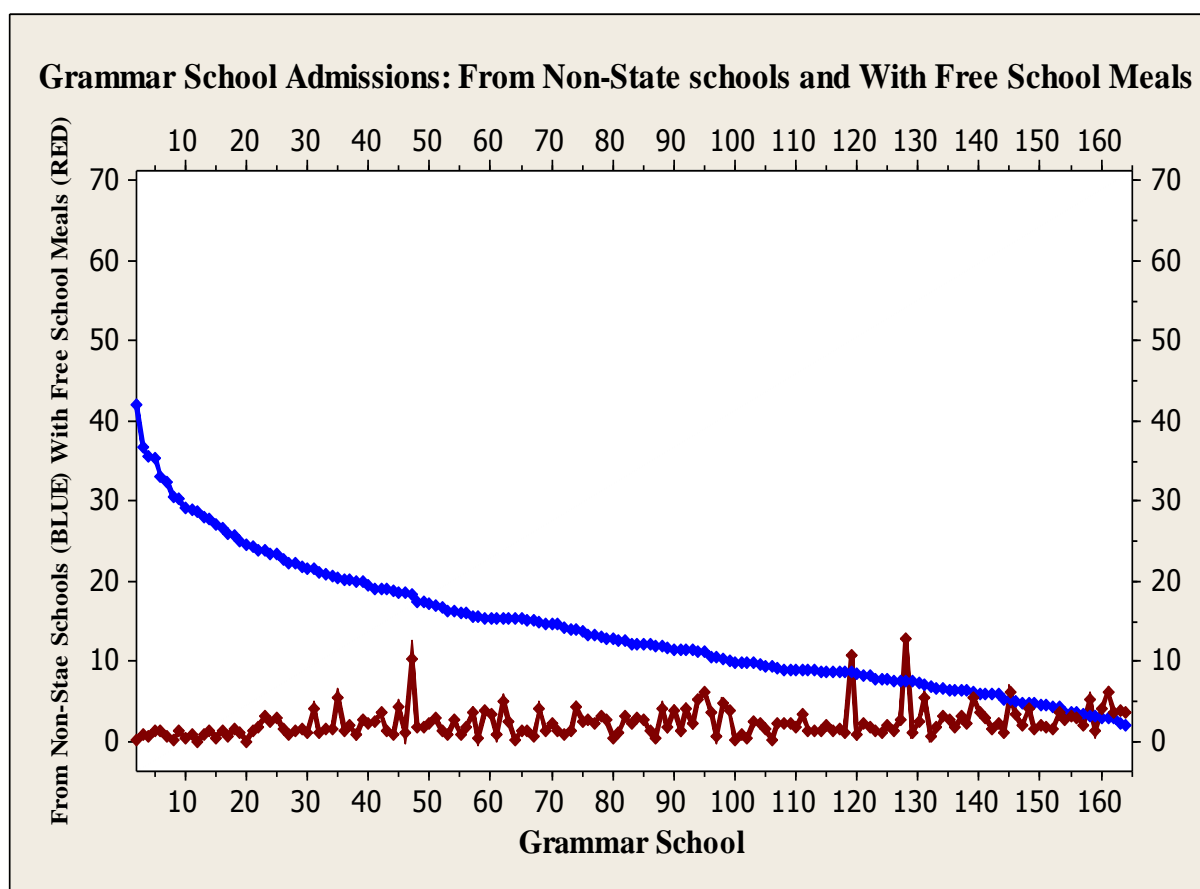
⁹ Coe, R., Jones, K., Searle, J., Kokptsaki, D., Kosnin, A., and Skinner, P. (2008) 'Evidenced on the effects of selective education systems' A Report for The Sutton Trust CEM Centre, University of Durham

overwhelming evidence that such academic selection entrenches advantage, it does not spread it."

Current context of ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ entrants to Grammar schools

The chart below shows, for all current Grammar schools, the proportion of their entry cohorts (averaged over 2005, 2006 and 2007) who were either ‘disadvantaged’ (in receipt of free school meals) or who entered from non-state maintained schools.

Figure 1.2 Entry into Grammar Schools



Data source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education. Data files: NPD_Ks4_2010_F, NPD_Ks4_2011_F and NPD_Ks4_2012_F.

Over the period under review there were some 22,500 entrants annually to Grammar schools, of these just 500+ annually were pupils ‘eligible for free school meals’ (or ‘disadvantaged’).

Over the same period the entry from non-state maintained schools averaged well over 3,000 pupils annually – a ratio of over 6 to 1 in ‘favour’ of these relatively advantaged pupils as compared with those from relatively disadvantaged home backgrounds.

The chart above together with this numerical evidence provides substantive support to Willetts' claim about the 'unlikelihood' of bright but disadvantaged pupils gaining admission to Grammar schools. The chart also suggests that most schools recruited very few 'disadvantaged' pupils – and that schools where this figure exceeded one in 20 entrants were very much in a minority (just 10 schools out of 164).

Recent developments

Over recent years the role of 'spokespersons' for the Grammar schools has been taken over by the professional organisation of Grammar school headteachers – the Grammar School Heads Association (GSHA). In contrast to the National Grammar Schools Association which has been prominent in calling for the 'return of Grammar schools', GSHA is a non-political professional organisation. Many of its members have recently become 'Converter Academies' which has given them freedoms from local authority administrative arrangements which for many schools have been in place for years. This is having an increasing impact on these schools' capacity to address issues, such as broadening their entry profiles, which were not really within their remit heretofore.

GSHA was the organisation that first recognised the need for Grammar schools to review their own performance in ways that paralleled those in use amongst the majority of non-selective schools. In 2008 The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust published the very first 'value-added' analysis of Grammar school performance taking as outcome measures the achievement of high level (A*/A Grade) outcomes (rather than the generalist measure in use in non-selective schools which were, of course, totally unchallenging for schools with high-ability intakes).

This prompted a recognition that whilst overall performances were 'high' there were substantial differences between Grammar schools in their transformation the raw materials they received into effective high-level GCSE performance.

Among the questions raised by the greater openness which this provided about the nature of Grammar school performance, it raised questions about these schools' roles within their own communities. Many of these schools have subsequently become 'Converter Academies' and more recently still some of these have raised questions about the appropriateness of their previous admission procedures.

In Buckinghamshire, for example, the 13 Grammar schools have withdrawn from the local authority administered selection procedures mainly because they had found that too many pupils admitted had been 'intensively tutored' for the passing of the entrance tests through 'excessive' test practice with the result that many other, possibly equally bright, pupils were precluded from entry. In some schools, particularly stand-alone Grammar schools, many candidates achieved 100% in the entrance tests and these pupils, coming top of the list, would normally take the majority of the places available. In place of this, these schools have commissioned CEM at University of Durham to

create a new form of selection test which will not be published to the general public (the intention of which is to minimise the influence of tutoring on test outcome). Similar moves are being made by other groups of schools – reflecting the very real concerns of these schools that they offer a more ‘open’ route into Grammar school for pupils irrespective of their capacity to pay for ‘coaching’.

Latest developments (end of June 2013)

There is a DFE framework policy under the title ‘Power to Innovate’ which allows educational establishments, foundations and local education authorities to apply to the Secretary of State to lift regulatory requirements for a time-limited period, to enable the trial of a specific innovative project.¹⁰

Given the substantial imbalance in admissions between ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ pupils some Grammar schools are seeking to use this procedure for a limited period to change their ‘over-subscription’ criteria specifically to allow priority to be given to ‘bright’ pupils applying for admission who are in receipt of the Pupil Premium.

As this Project progresses it is anticipated that other ways will be found by Grammar schools (and groups of Grammar schools) to engage more specifically with their local communities. The intention of which will be both to encourage a wider range of pupils to apply for admission and also to emphasise the particular importance of those ‘bright but disadvantaged’ pupils’ who feature strongly in the current concerns about the ‘fairness’ of the Grammar school admission procedures.

¹⁰ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/schoolperformance/b0014624/power-to-innovate/application-process>

