

Telling stories about comprehensive education

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Telling Stories about Comprehensive Education: hidden histories of politics, policy and practice

Abstract

This article re-visits contestation and critique over the nationwide introduction of comprehensive schools in 20th century England. In so doing, it considers the contribution of scholar-activist Caroline Benn (1926-2000) and a progressive network in education who were challenging ideas about fixed ability or potential. The recent availability of Benn's personal papers opens an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the politics of comprehensive education, to consider the meaning and significance of the policy as our historical perspective lengthens, notably the question of whether legislation was needed to implement so major a reform and foster cultural change in a society characterized by substantial inequalities in income, status and power. It will be argued that we need to challenge contemporary political narratives that seek to normalize academic selection as a force for social justice and high attainment and maintain a belief in the myth of meritocracy.

Keywords

Comprehensive, educability, education, intelligence, meritocracy, selection

Epigraph

Once upon a time, in the late 1960s, well-meaning politicians accepted the most progressive idea in the history of British education. They decided to establish a national network of new schools which would deal equally with all children, providing a free secondary education for all students of all backgrounds, without favour of class or ability. They called these new schools 'comprehensives' (Nick Davies, 2000, p. 23).

Introduction

Journalist Nick Davies' words suggest the idea that everyone could be equally well educated was (and is) contentious. Davies thought comprehensive schools run by local authorities work. For him, the underlying issue was whether or not they actually existed. Indeed, those who failed to see the benefits of a nation-wide education service designed for all students sought to sabotage the case for the introduction of comprehensive schools and the abolition of selection at 11-plus. This article offers a wide-ranging reappraisal of the comprehensive movement through the ideas and actions of scholar-activist Caroline Benn (1926-2000) to re-examine the legacy of the drive for a new institution, new courses and imaginative teaching; growing educational opportunities for the mass of children. The recent availability of Benn's personal papers opens an opportunity for a deeper understanding of what was at stake in the conflicts and the distance of time gives us the opportunity to reflect on this shift in educational provision with a fresh eye, notably the question of whether legislation was needed to implement so major a reform and foster cultural change in a society characterized by substantial inequalities in income, status and power.¹

My theory and the methodology I call historical ethnography captures a new imaginary of extending a notion of ethnographic fieldwork into the domain of history, in a similar way to that used by sociologist Stephen Ball in his 1987 book *The Micropolitics of the School*. Like Ball, I avoid a perspective of struggles in and struggles over schools that takes the rhetoric for granted, and use instead historical reconstruction and deepening in the light of autobiography, documents, interviews (by myself and others) and a review of contemporary positions. Interweaving personal and parliamentary politics, I map and describe a set of policy networks, policy actors, discourses, connections, agendas and how they are related together from the inception of comprehensive schools as state policy in 1965 to the defeat of the Labour Party in the 1979 general election. Selected voices are interwoven to historicize comprehensive values in the context of British post-war social democracy (i.e. the 1950s and thereafter). These voices enable us to achieve understanding but I do not claim they are representative.

The history of Holland Park comprehensive school in Inner London is used to examine the politics of experience. This is a local history but it is one with wider significance because Inner London was England's largest education authority and set the pace for others to follow. When Labour gained power in 1934, it was the first place to endorse the common or 'multilateral' secondary school and Holland Park was one of England's first purpose-built comprehensive schools. Caroline and her politician husband Tony Benn chose the school and withdrew their children from the private sector in order to 'go comprehensive' in 1964. Caroline later chaired the school's governing body and was an example of what Robert Putnam called civic engagement (or 'virtue') leading to 'social capital', enabling people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric (Putnam, 2000).

Looking beyond high politics, the study contributes to the writing of a new meta-narrative of 1970s Britain that aims to historicize and destabilize interpretations of past events rooted in the belief that selective education is *not* ideological whereas comprehensive education *is*. Such interpretations serve to privilege the multiple political and cultural assumptions that helped frame them (Robinson et al, 2017; Littler, 2018). I seek to address several questions. Was the idea of a common secondary school highly consonant with a post-war culture of individualism, distinguished by a liberal, humanitarian and child-centred philosophy? Did this mean the rhetoric turned on the individual, rather than on the social structures, practices, discourses and cultures entangled in the reproduction of a hierarchical society, in which the more fortunate pass on their advantages to later generations? What were the national aims and curricula that guided reformers and what do they say about the relation between education, culture and power now and then?

Background to the comprehensive reform: the genesis of meritocracy

The Education Act of 1902 gave local authorities the power to set up secondary schools but they were to be 'exclusive'. Secondary schooling was to develop separately from elementary schooling in accordance with the outlook that not everyone was educable to the levels hitherto reserved for elite groups. Therefore, access was through the payment of fees or a scholarship system for those who passed a competitive examination at the age

of ten and might still be expected to pay a variety of costs. Generally, there were more scholarships for boys meaning the odds against an elementary schoolboy winning a scholarship in the capital, for instance, were 150 to one and 500 to one for his female counterpart (Burchell, 1971, p. 63).

Social class, gender and accidents of geography mattered. As Labour Party support and organisation progressed in the new age of mass democracy, socialists used the power of municipal authority to respond to working-class demand for free places in the secondary schools (R. Barker, 1972; Worley, 2005). Durham, Labour-controlled from 1919, was one of several authorities that opened all places in its secondary schools to 'scholarship' pupils only, whereas other authorities prioritized the children of fee-payers over those qualified by 'ability' (Banks, 1955, p. 66). Most children attended a free all-age elementary school, leaving at 14 to go into work and therefore unable to sit the public examinations promoted in the secondary schools that led to university and the professions.

Cyril Burt, the country's leading educational psychologist thought it possible to say, from the results of tests applied at the age of ten or 11, what a child's future accomplishments might be. Selection and the theory of children falling naturally into distinct 'types' was educational orthodoxy from at least the 1930s when belief in the efficacy of intelligence testing made streaming as a 'system' a practically universal method of internal school organisation to achieve a homogenous ability grouping and thence to teach the group as a class (Simon, 1970, p. 143). Four features of curriculum thinking - differentiation, functionality, selection and social advancement - characterised what Simon (1994, p. 42) called 'the emergent system' organised for allocating young people to very different life chances.

The Education Act of 1944 created universal free secondary education. Claims made in the 1943 Norwood Report that it was possible to identify three types of children with three types of mind – the academic, the technical and the practical, supported the separation of pupils into three sorts of secondary school - grammar, technical and modern. The new grammar schools would offer a curriculum that emphasized PE, 'character' and the English language as opposed to anything more technical or modern. Since the passage of all alike to the appropriate type of provision meant using some sort of selection criteria, this would be met through intelligence tests, whose results gave each child an 'intelligence quotient' or IQ, plus tests of achievement in English and arithmetic (Rose and Rose, 1979; Chitty, 2009).

When the Labour Party gained sole power in 1945 education policy continued to unfold on selective lines. For six years, children would have schooling that moved through distinct stages with others of the same age until selection for school destination based upon testing at ten or eleven.² The new secondary moderns, Education minister Ellen Wilkinson assured her party conference in June 1946, 'were to be modern in aim as well as name and in no sense dumping grounds' cited in Kynaston, 2008, p. 150). Tellingly, the word 'modern' was pejorative in 18th and 19th century educational discourses

(Cohen 2006) and both here and in the French *collèges modernes* a euphemism for ‘less clever’ (Sampson, 1962, p. 183).

In most towns or cities there was considerable prestige attached to the grammar schools. Tradition and past association with the middle and upper classes gave strength to the endowed variety and those whose pretensions were more brittle still offered a sense of distinction, of having been ‘chosen’ for ‘better’ things (McCulloch, 2006). Consequently, ‘almost all their pupils were deeply imbued with a guilt-free sense of belonging to the present and future elite’ and perhaps more than any other institution the grammar school ‘set the moral as well as the intellectual standards of the community’ (Kynaston, 2008, p. 567). Throughout the 1940s and 50s, belief in IQ testing sanctioned the rigidly streamed and competitively selective system that developed. Technical schools accounted for less than five per cent of the age group and while some local authorities established comprehensive schools in opposition to government advice, the issue became whether a child became one of the 20 per cent who ‘succeeded’ and went to a grammar school or ‘failed’ and went to a less well-resourced secondary modern.

Government reports and sociological surveys soon uncovered anomalies. Evidence on intelligence tests showed working-class children to be unfairly disadvantaged. They were seen as socially biased and the children of middle-class parents dominated grammar intakes owing to advantages imbued by family background including the ability to pay for the coaching and intensive tuition that were found to improve a child’s performance (Heim, 1954; Banks, 1955; Floud *et al.*, 1956). From 1946, secondary moderns and the bottom streams of grammar schools were full of working-class children who often had a negative experience and the fact that many children deemed capable of benefitting from a selective education left at the earliest opportunity contributed to growing scepticism about grammar-school standards and values (Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Jackson, 1964). Added to which, secondary moderns did not enjoy equivalence with the academic and specialised curriculum of the grammar school as McCulloch’s (1998) research testifies.

Brian Simon went in 1950 to the University of Leicester. Simon completed a teaching diploma at the University of London and his experience as a teacher in 1940s Manchester made him question the fatalistic notions of the intelligence-testers. Simon stressed the theoretical confusion over the nature and process of education and of child development, arguing a child’s intellectual skills and abilities were formed in association with life and experience, notably through the use of language. ‘The teacher who sets out to educate the children under his (sic) care meets them as human beings’ he wrote in 1953. ‘He recognizes that learning is a process of human change, not merely the formal acquisition of knowledge’, which means starting ‘from the conviction that all the children under his care are educable’. This, Simon continues, ‘is not to say that he shuts his eyes to obvious differences in attainment, but it does mean that he refuses to be blinded by the assumption that degrees of attainment reflect degrees of “intelligence”’ (Simon, 1953, p. 103).

Within and beyond the classroom, the great variations in grammar school provision exacerbated doubts about the knowledge tradition of innate, measurable intelligence. It was hard to believe that the minority capable of benefitting from an ‘academic’ education was 40 per cent in one place and 15 per cent in another, which undermined the claims of IQ testing and its genetic base somewhat (Burgess, 1970, p. 7). Peter Newsam, future chief education officer for Inner London, describes in his memoirs how he found the selective system wanting. Head of Humanities at a grammar school on the edge of Oxford in the late-1950s, he conducted his own tests, which suggested only about three quarters of his pupils ‘could be said to have been correctly selected’ in terms of measured intelligence (Newsam, 2014, p. 147). Academic results in the grammar schools themselves were under par and the sociologist Stephen J. Ball, who found himself a working-class ‘fish-out-of-water’, recounts that the teaching he experienced ‘was dull, didactic and repetitive. Talk, board writing and snap questions’ (Elliott, 2007, p. 50; Ball, 2015, p. 219).

Within and consequent upon the system there was discrimination against girls, which stemmed from nothing more scientific than a pre-ordained difference in the number of places in single-sex grammar schools. Large numbers of girls, suitable in terms of measured intelligence, were not being selected in order to ensure gender balance in grammar school entry. The fact that primary schoolgirls frequently performed better in the 11-plus led some areas to mark them down, while in others the policy was to add new tests. Common sense and social observation suggested the difference ‘is not real because it does not last, it is not a phenomenon produced by the test, it is a phenomenon produced by “nature”’ (Thom, 1987, p. 141). In a society that proclaimed everyone now had a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work would allow, the pass rate for the examination selecting a new, bigger and better-educated elite, was set higher for girls than for boys.

Michael Young intended his 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* to warn against an imagined future society in which individual ‘merit’, based on a narrow understanding of intelligence, determines social station. This would produce a community bound together by the belief that those at the top deserve their power and their fortunes because of innate ability.

The educational ladder was also a social ladder – the scruffy, ill-mannered boy who started at five years old at the bottom had to be metamorphosed, rung by rung, into a more presentable, more polished, and more confident as well as a more knowledgeable lad at the top... When he finished his climb, he could then stand comparison with others who had begun their ascent from a much higher level (Michael Young 1958, pp. 53-4).

In Young’s book women and ‘populists’ emerge as critics resisting the gradual extension of sifting and segregation, and denying all opportunity to the rest – dissidents who eventually, goaded by the constant reminders of their inferiority, rise in angry revolt. *The Times* commented on the ambiguous nature of ‘merit’ in 1961 (quoted in Sampson, 1962, p. 186). ‘There will not even be the satisfaction of being able to claim that a man’s place is at least the reward of his own merit, for the experts in examinations agree that

proficiency in them is owed partly to inherited intelligence and partly to family environment, and both endowments are as fortuitous as noble birth’.

Young’s closest friend in the high politics of the post-war Labour Party was Anthony Crosland (Briggs, 2006, p. 25). Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism*, first published in 1956, claimed that modern socialism was concerned to improve welfare and secure justice between individuals. He wanted to establish a national network of comprehensive schools that would deal equally with all children as a way of creating a more cohesive and tolerant society. In another book of the period, *Eleven-Plus and All That* (1956) Flann Campbell concluded the comprehensive had begun to supplant the grammar school because economic and technological changes were producing different patterns of labour demand. In his leader’s speech to the 1963 Labour Party conference Harold Wilson pointed to the scientific revolution and persistence under-performance of British industry in the face of international competition. ‘We simply cannot as a nation afford to neglect the educational development of a single boy or girl. We cannot afford to cut off three-quarters or more of our children from virtually any chance of higher education. The Russians do not, the Germans do not, the Americans do not, and the Japanese do not, and we cannot afford to either’ (Wilson, 1964, p. 9).

The existence of opportunity?

A grammar school boy who made it to Oxford on his own ‘merits’, Wilson believed he embodied his case that Labour was the meritocratic, democratic future, and dismissed the aristocratic Conservatives as yesterday’s men. Amid assertions that British society was too class-ridden, he promoted Labour’s commitment to comprehensive education as an efficient way of equalizing opportunities. Wilson scraped an election success in 1964, overturning a 100-seat Conservative majority to secure a tiny majority that he consolidated two years later. Pledged to the abolition of the segregation of children arising from the 11-plus in 1964 and 1966, Wilson sought to present party policy as grammar schools for all in the 1970 general election.

Tony Benn entered the first Wilson government (but not the Cabinet) and recorded his pleasure at the appointment of Michael Stewart as Education Minister in his political *Diaries* (T. Benn, 1988a, p. 179). Stewart was a former teacher committed to comprehensive schools and sought Cabinet approval for a circular that requested local authorities to submit plans for secondary reorganisation and agreement to use legislation to deal with any recalcitrant areas (Dean, 1998; McCulloch, 2016). Led by Wilson, the Cabinet refused. Only former teachers Fred Peart and William Ross backed Stewart. Edward Short, Wilson’s chief whip and former head of a secondary modern school, voiced his extreme disillusionment in his autobiography. ‘In spite of a lucid explanation by Michael the Cabinet rejected his plea and decided that the case for comprehensive schools should be put to the local authorities in a carefully drafted circular which asked for their co-operation’ (Short, 1989, p.105). When Stewart moved to the Foreign Office and Crosland succeeded him, Tony Benn worried he ‘may be weak on the comprehensives, behind-hand on the real issue of streaming versus non-streaming’ (T. Benn, 1988a, p.208).

To implement Labour's comprehensive commitment Crosland published *Circular 10/65*. Junior minister Reginald Prentice wanted 'require', but Crosland pursued a policy of 'request'. Interviewed for the book *The Politics of Education* by his former civil servant Maurice Kogan, he spoke of being influenced by his judgement of the 'general mood of the local authority world' (Kogan, 1976, p. 189). His opinions evident from Susan Crosland's biography where she claimed her husband was 'driven mad by the obtuseness of those who claimed grammar schools did not affect comprehensives despite the undeniable fact that the former creamed off the more gifted children' (S. Crosland, 1982, p. 148). As Minister, Crosland claimed social and academic benefits for the comprehensive school while maintaining that the abolition of streaming would be 'against common sense' (Marsden, 1970, p. 137). Outside Whitehall, those who were dissatisfied with Labour's approach launched the Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC) in the autumn of 1965.

Substantial overlap in membership could be seen with the urban think tank, the Institute of Community Studies (ICS), and the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE), for example Michael Young (who founded both), Brian Jackson (who co-founded ACE) and Michael Armstrong (ICS and Nuffield researcher). Academics included Robin Pedley and Brian Simon who co-founded the journal *FORUM* for the discussion of new trends in education and Peter Townsend (formerly at ICS, co-founder professor at the University of Essex). Edward Blishen (*FORUM* editorial board), who in 1950 starting teaching at Archway Secondary Modern School in London and published an unflinchingly realistic autobiographical novel *Roaring Boys* and future Conservative politician Rhodes Boyson, then head at Robert Montefiore Secondary Modern School in Stepney, were both supporters. 'The secondary modern schools were a government confidence trick which led inevitably to the campaign for comprehensive schools' would be Boyson's conclusion 30 years later (Boyson, 1995, p. 47).

The campaign headquarters were in the Benn family home and Information Officer Caroline Benn set about monitoring every aspect of the movement. Tuesdays and Fridays were CSC days. 'They used to meet there in the day time when I was at the ministerial office and I'd come home at night and find all their stuff', Tony recalled. 'I would put it away and then it would be available when they came again' (T. Benn to J. Martin, 19 December 2012). Helped by volunteers like newly qualified teacher Clyde Chitty (who trained at Leicester with Brian Simon), Benn edited a new magazine, *Comprehensive Education*, that published accounts of research carried out by teachers. As one of the original sponsors of CSC, Brian Simon was concerned to keep the educational aims of the movement to the fore. At one *FORUM* conference in 1966, for instance, he reiterated his view that unstreaming 'must stand or fall on educational grounds' after the head of a West Riding comprehensive described a school where he could tell the bottom stream by their 'jumble-sale-looking-clothes' (Galway, 1966, pp. 16-17).

Ann and Howard Glennerster were determined CSC supporters. Ann Glennerster heard Caroline Benn speaking on the radio about her intention to take her elder sons out of their private school, which triggered memories of a childhood visit to a secondary modern. She recalled being 'conscious that they were 13 years old, didn't know any more than me, I

could only have been 9 years old and they were going to leave school at 14'. Her husband, Howard, got to Oxford despite failing his 11-plus and never wanted a child of his to experience this early rebuff. In Howard's words: 'We were strong supporters of comprehensive schools, very conscious that the grammar school lobby was good at getting their message out but we were not. We wanted to change this' (H. Glennerster to J. Martin, 30 September 2013).

The failure to legislate was the huge issue in the early years of the CSC, as Michael Armstrong remembered very clearly in 2015. 'We were all convinced that legislation was absolutely necessary and when the government decided against it there was a general feeling that that was a disastrous mistake'. Crosland thought the remaining grammar schools would 'just die away' but CSC disagreed, given the reluctance to end selection in some areas. Campaigners also regretted the lack of any generally agreed set of aims or purposes for the new comprehensive schools, the essence of a comprehensive system being all schools offering comparable facilities, staffing, and curriculum (Benn and Hatch, 1970, p. 1). Tony Benn noted relations with Crosland (who taught him Economics at Oxford) were 'a bit frosty' after Caroline began campaigning (T. Benn, 1988a, p. 415) and Armstrong explained the nature of the division to me. He recalled Crosland being 'caustic about Caroline generally' because she was 'linked up' with Brian Simon about whom he was 'deeply suspicious because of his Communist past.'

Critics of comprehensive schooling predicted dire consequences. Eric James, High Master of Manchester Grammar School from 1945 to 1962, thought the policy would be a national disaster. 'If you want to have equality of opportunity, you inevitably have a meritocracy: but you can mitigate the dangers, by producing essentially *humane* meritocrats. The grammar schools must have their own *noblesse oblige* – but in order to have that, they have to *know* that they are a new kind of aristocracy – as Etonians know it' (Sampson, 1962, p. 190). A series of 'Black Papers' published by right-wing academics and policy groups between 1969 and 1977, was an important focus in which arguments built, individuals and campaigns connected up and a political identity forged (Chitty, 1989). The second appeared just before the 1969 Conservative party conference and attacked comprehensive education as social engineering and a destruction of academic standards. The fourth quoted shadow education minister Norman St-John Stevas who claimed a quarter of a century's left-wing possession of the educational initiative had caused 'unprecedented worry and alarm among parents' about quality within education. Edward Short, who served as Education Secretary between 1968 and 1970, denounced the publication of the first as 'one of the blackest days for education in the past 100 years' (quoted in Timmins, 1995, p. 273).

Wilson called the 1970 general election when Short's Bill making comprehensive education a statutory duty was before Parliament. Tony Benn wanted Short to explain something 'since I'm bound to be asked'. Did the Bill allow selection at 16-plus and would government have the power to withhold funds from areas refusing to submit comprehensive plans? Next day, CSC released the statement 'Comprehensive education means education for all, regardless of ability, at all stages of schooling. The only test for entry to schools after the statutory leaving age should be the individual pupil's desire to

continue his or her education' (CB 5, file 1). At a Downing Street dinner before the Bill's second reading, Wilson said to Short, "'This is non-controversial now, I understand,'" and Ted said, "Well yes, except for Caroline Benn'" (T. Benn, 1988b, p. 238). Short's Bill failed as the Conservatives returned to office and revoked 10/65.

Sociologist Dennis Marsden (formerly at ICS, now with Townsend at Essex), identified three groups and ideologies that emerged most clearly in the Labour Party. Meritocrats committed to the economic harnessing of wasted talent and a broader ladder of qualification. Social engineers who sought to engender social solidarity. Egalitarians who saw children as of equal worth and favoured community schools. Marsden claimed Circular 10/65 was the product of conservative civil servants, which papered over cracks within the party over the comprehensive school. In his view, a lack of central direction over Labour's programme caused 'an information and power vacuum at local level, where sets of party councillors who knew little about comprehensive education were in the hands of Local Education Officers who might or might not support comprehensives' (Marsden, 1972, pp. 137-8).

The polarization of debate troubled Brian Simon who feared the hostage to fortune a binary distinction between egalitarian/ socio-political and meritocratic/ educational approaches created. The path he charted was to make the educational case for change from an outdated system based on a whole set of set of false assumptions. 'We have new methods which lay emphasis on learning rather than didactic teaching, a new educational technology' Simon said, 'there is an opportunity to try out what secondary education can do to develop human powers, as opposed to channeling them from an early age, and it is in the general interest that this opportunity be taken' (Simon, 1970, p. 7). In no sense was he complacent about genuine educational standards. 'It is only by raising the general level of education among the population as a whole that the necessary basis is laid for raising the higher levels themselves' (Simon, 1972, p. 149).

Albert Rowe, head of a purpose-built comprehensive, the David Lister High School in Hull, agreed. Author of *The Education of the Average Child* (Rowe, 1959), Rowe and his school were the focus of a 1967 film *Education for the Future*. Showing the current aids and new practice in the teaching of unstreamed classes at David Lister, the film sought to answer critics who feared a lowering of academic standards (BFI, 2010). Brian Simon visited the school and Caroline Benn thought 'no one can have a perfect knowledge of the British Comprehensive School' without having been there (C. Benn to A. Rowe, 30 June 1969, CB 5). Rowe described the community-centred ethos and teaching designed to enable every child to succeed in a *FORUM* article (Rowe, 1970, p. 10). 'There's no one recipe for a happy, useful, and fulfilled life, certainly not just passing examinations. Who are we to say what roads for our pupils lead to the good life?'

Caroline Benn bore the brunt of the writing and data analysis for the first report on the British comprehensive reform, *Half Way There*, first published in 1970. Co-authored with Brian Simon, she wrote 13 of the 21 chapters, including the line 'A comprehensive school is *not* a social experiment; it is an educational reform' (Benn and Simon, 1972, p. 110). They pressed the case hard for legislation to bring about comprehensive education. So great was Benn's knowledge that the policy-makers and planners would consult her

and in 1970, she was coopted as an expert member of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). ‘She had a remarkable effect on people’, says Michael Armstrong, ‘we were all fairly pugnacious characters in one way or another but Caroline was seen as, regarded with a certain aura in many ways’. So, who was Caroline Benn and what did her ‘career’ of active citizenship mean for the comprehensive school world?

Holland Park School and the Politics of Place

The daughter of a Cincinnati lawyer, in 1948 Vassar graduate Caroline DeCamp crossed the Atlantic to attend an Oxford summer school. On 2nd August, she had tea with Tony Benn and nine days later Benn asked her to marry him. They wed in Caroline’s hometown and had four children, all born in the 1950s. In the following decades Caroline made the comprehensive movement ‘her own preserve’ (to quote Michael Armstrong), in addition to being author, teacher, mother and political wife. She served as school governor at Holland Park for 35 years, when school governance was less open to women and the ILEA one of a minority of local authorities with school governing bodies (Deem, Brehony and Heath, 1995).

London had built a number of comprehensive schools by 1965 and secondary schools of different type co-existed there. Indeed, Britain’s first purpose-built comprehensive was Kidbrooke, confidently designed to accommodate two thousand girls (Fenwick, 1976, p. 45). Founded in 1954, Kidbrooke became an educational sensation and organised tours were booked to capacity. While *Labour Woman* presented it as ‘London’s pride’, the right-wing magazine *Time and Tide* said its motto should be ‘All Equal and All Stupid’ (H. Davies, 1976, p. 25). Holland Park School opened in 1958. Like Kidbrooke, its architecture expressed the idealism and the size of the concepts. The school’s catchment included north Kensington’s slums and the luxury white stucco houses of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Conservative politician Lady Norman called it a great ‘factory of education’ at the official inauguration (‘London - Super School Opened’, 1959, British Pathé newsreel).

Allen Clarke was the founding head. He went to private school and read history at London University. Clarke began his teaching career in 1933 and became a head teacher after war service (M. Benn, 2007). As the school website puts it:

He led benignly in an academic gown. As the Sixties progressed, prefects, Latin mottos, speech days and Houses, began to give way to rather more egalitarian ideals. Standards of discipline fell, the fabric of the building declined and what had met the need in the early Sixties was deemed outmoded: a student demonstration in December 1970 rather heralded in the new era of liberalism and a period of mixed fortunes. The school attracted, in the 1970s and 1980s, some high profile socialist grandees and a smattering of literati and glitterati of West London. The Benn family gave enormous support to the school and were advocates of its ideals. Whilst the proportion of such families was small by comparison to the whole, such alumni provided a cachet that has continued to dominate people’s perceptions and understanding of the school (<https://www.hollandparkschool.co.uk/about-us/history>).

Evidence from Caroline Benn's archive and the recollections of participants complicates the institutional history presented here. During the period of her governorship, she dedicated her life to building effective comprehensive education which meant facilitating practices that enabled everyone to enjoy a full education - unstreaming, a comprehensive curriculum and flexible teaching methods.

With Labour out of office, Caroline Benn became Chair of governors at Holland Park. In December 1970, the school's world opened up following a pupil demonstration and the leader of the ILEA, Sir Ashley Bramall, criticised the popular and local press for misrepresenting the facts (press cuttings, CB 1). 'I can understand Charles Curran, MP, as a right-wing journalist pouncing on last week's disturbances at Holland Park School as a heaven-sent opportunity to carry on... about the awful dangers of "pupil power"' he said. 'But Mr Curran does not mention that at Holland Park last Wednesday representatives of the press and television went further than reporting. They attempted by bribes and provocation to create incidents' (*Evening News*, 7 December 1970, CB 2). Photographers gave children money to break windows and tomatoes to throw and Tony Benn recorded the school had to call in the police to get the press off their premises. He saw it as 'part of the great attack on Holland Park and the comprehensive movement, and upon Caroline and me' (T. Benn, 1988b, p. 317).

Between 1966 and Labour's defeat in 1970, the proportion of pupils at comprehensive schools rose from 12 to 40 per cent but school discipline was not a new phenomenon. What *was* new was the use made of it in the political arena. 'For as long as it was confined to the largely unknown secondary moderns in the backstreets and slums of our cities, it was something that stayed out of the headlines'. Indeed, 'blackboard jungle' was an unpleasant fact of which middle-class parents need not become aware. 'After all, it affected only those schools which were good enough for *other people's children*' (Chitty, 1979, pp. 157-8).

Another sensational Holland Park story in *The Spectator* alleged sixth formers were operating as call girls. Editor George Gale claimed a governor as his source, although the governors all denied it (A. Bramall to C. Benn, 22 December 1970, CB 1). Benn credited Gale with 'a concern for responsible journalism' telling him of the trouble taken to establish the facts (CB to G. Gale, 31 July 1971, CB 1). She also canvassed parents. One mother feared:

'The trouble is at the top'. One has been hearing this parental comment for the past four years or so. The root of the problem does seem to lie with the headmaster, a man called rather than chosen. The ILEA, in adopting an ostrich attitude, are greatly underestimating the damage that is being done to comprehensive education generally. Most parents, as well as some of the more responsible media, are aware that Allen Clarke is an alcoholic. As an alcoholic, he is a success, by which I mean that he is never seen in a compromising situation – in fact, according to at least one fifth-former, he is rarely ever seen outside the administration block at all. For that reason alone, as a headmaster, he is a failure (N. Tuff to C. Benn, 22 December 1970, CB 1).

A father who wanted the school to have ‘the very best, convinced, dynamic and progressive’ leadership, urged governors to ‘consider whether it is getting it, and if not, what should be done to remedy matters’ (Arthur Levy to C. Benn, 22 December 1970, CB 1). Clarke retired. The governors and ILEA officers appointed Dr Derek Rushworth who had previous experience of Holland Park as the school’s first head of Modern Languages.

An Oxford graduate and former grammar school boy, Rushworth left a headship in Shoreditch to return to Holland Park. The buildings were in disrepair, staff turnover was high and morale low and relations with rich local residents (including Lady Norman) remained poor. One teacher described the impact of his appointment. ‘There was such a drive, such a belief that it ought to happen, that the school ended the academic year in July as a streamed school and returned in September with all the lower school organised along mixed ability lines’ (Shallice, 2002, p. 35). Challenging traditional hierarchies, Rushworth made the case for establishing a democratic system of relationships within the school. ‘All aspects of the school must be open to discussion, including the curriculum, syllabuses, methods, and why some pupils aren’t interested’ he said (Rushworth, 1973, CB 1).

Unstreaming was the primary condition for ensuring no child would be labelled from the start. Benn and Rushworth both endorsed the principle ‘*that the education of all children is held to be intrinsically of equal value*’ (italics in the original, Daunt, 1975, p. 27). As Benn put it: ‘Comprehensive schools are not supposed to be only as good as grammar schools are for a minority: they are supposed to be good as comprehensive schools: better for everyone’ (Benn, 1982a, p. 50). She refuted the assumption behind the formation of the National Association for Gifted Children in 1966, which focussed on the hunt for the few. ‘Giftedness is what education itself helps to create and release’, she said, ‘and the purpose of education is to help foster as many gifts as possible in as many children as possible’ (Benn, 1982b, pp. 83-4).

A Labour government was in office when William Tyndale primary school in London received enormous publicity in 1974. Teachers at the school operated a progressive curriculum and a subsequent inquiry critical of their behaviour and methods encouraged calls for accountability. Black Paper author Rhodes Boyson, now a Conservative MP, used the alleged failure and chaos in the classroom to discredit progressive education (Riley, 1998, pp. 21-41). In *The Crisis in Education* (1975), Boyson called for a return to selection and rigorous discipline to raise standards, accused Benn of being ‘politically-motivated’ and Holland Park of short-changing ‘able’ children who he just did not believe could ‘catch up with equally-gifted pupils well taught in selective ability classes from the time they enter secondary school’ (Boyson, 1975, p. 94). In the midst of a Conservative offensive including a carefully orchestrated ‘parental’ campaign in the case of the rebellious Tameside local authority over the ‘threat’ to local grammar schools, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan felt the time was ripe for a public debate on education.

Callaghan delivered a defining speech of his premiership at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October 1976. He talked about complaints from industry that schools were not adequately preparing children for the world of work and expressed concerns about the methods and aims of informal instruction, the need to bring curriculum matters into the public domain, and to monitor the use of resources in order to maintain a national standard of performance (Callaghan, 1987, pp. 409-12). A month later, the press unleashed a ferocious attack on examination results at Holland Park (CB 2). ‘Showpiece school in exam flop’ (*The Sun*, 11 November 1976) captures the tone of reporting that called into question school policy to give all pupils the chance to sit public examinations and manage an open sixth form.

Under pressure to demonstrate to a skeptical public that it could do at least as well as London grammar schools in terms of examination success, in 1975 high levels of youth unemployment saw more students stay on for a post-16 year such that 75 percent took the General Certificate of Education Ordinary level in 1976, compared with 44 percent from comprehensives nationally (*Evening Standard*, 12 November 1976, CB 2). Pupils with past experience of classroom failure praised Holland Park because it did not label them as ‘dumb’ and called it ‘unfair and misleading’ to judge a school on its GCE exam results alone (*School Magazine*, December 1976, CB 1).

Two local Conservatives helped develop the narrative around Holland Park. Robert Vigars, school governor and leader of the opposition on the ILEA and borough councillor Muriel Gumbel. In print, Vigars made direct comparisons between Holland Park and Tyndale. ‘I warned the Government months ago that things were not right at the school,’ he told the *Kensington News and Post*. ‘I urged that an inquiry should be held into last year’s exam results, which were equally disturbing... I feared then we could have another William Tyndale on our hands if we did not investigate’ (19 November 1976, CB 2). Angry parents called for his removal saying ‘a man so prejudiced against comprehensive education in general and Holland Park School in particular is unfit to govern a school under the terms of the 1944 Act.’ They wanted a Conservative Party nominee prepared to offer constructive criticism rather than ‘denigration and malicious and destructive action against the school and its good name’ instead (CB 2).

Whilst the governors censured Vigars for bringing politics into education, the Authority proved reluctant to remove him from the governing body of a school in his ward. Next spring *Kensington News and Post* published a letter:

I have been asked to make clear the context of a statement which you quote me as having made in connection with a report on last year’s examination results at Holland Park School, and which contained a reference to William Tyndale School. This reference was in relation to circumstances existing nearly two years ago, prior to the publication of the Auld Report on William Tyndale School, in the light of the subsequent findings of that report, I would not think it right to make any comparison between Holland Park School and William Tyndale School. I am confident that the headmaster and staff of Holland Park School are aware of the importance of examination results as an indicator of academic standards (Robert Vigars, 25 March 1977, CB 2).

Boyson repeated the allegations but acknowledged his data was wrong when Benn corrected him (C. Benn to R. Boyson, April 1977; R. Boyson to C. Benn 12 April 1977, CB 3). In *Comprehensive Education*, she attributed the imbalance in the publicity and neglect of positive research findings on flexible grouping and unstreaming to the elite who largely controlled the media and opposed educational and social change (C. Benn, 1979a, p. 4).

Meanwhile, the thinly disguised political attacks on Holland Park continued. In November 1976, Benn wrote to Lord Butler, architect of the 1944 Act and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. She asked that he forgive her for writing a strong letter, but knew he would do the same were Trinity unfairly denigrated. Butler had said he thought large schools were 'a pity' and cited Holland Park. Yet the decision 'was made by the Ministry of Education officials in the 1940s and 1950s' she reminded him. 'The teachers and pupils and others who work in the school today, have learned to cope very well indeed with the size of school your generation left to them' (C. Benn to Lord Butler, CB 3).

Inside Parliament, a new Education Act received royal assent on 22 November. It defined comprehensives as schools not entered as the result of selection tests (which was also true of secondary moderns) and unlike legislation in other countries, it did not insist that all authorities had the duty to provide comprehensive education by a set date. Nor did it bring the private sector into reorganisation. Pro-comprehensive campaigners urged the government to make local authorities observe the law, end selection and refuse permission for place buying in private schools. The Act did empower the Education Secretary to require non-selective planning, the criterion of all their schools of comprehensive status became the definition of re-organised authorities and the first thing the Thatcher government did in 1979 was to repeal it. Immediately, Essex and Kent withdrew proposals to go comprehensive, as did Bolton and Kingston-on-Thames (Simon, 2010, p. 474).

For Benn, the private was political. Presented in terms of her husband on an early mock-up of the dust jacket for *Half Way There*, she told the publisher 'No professional person could agree to being introduced by the profession of another person' (C. Benn to Mr Glover, CB 5). The BBC declined to mention her name when reviewing the book because she was the wife of a government Minister but the scruple was not universal. Once Rushworth asked Muriel Gumbel to explain the link between the Holland Park's exam results and the husband of the chair of governors (*The Evening Standard*, 1 December 1976, CB 2). She 'exposes by her innuendo the political background to the whole smear campaign against the school. Its "unique catchment area" includes the worst slums in London, which are, need I say it, the responsibility of the borough council on which Mrs Gumbel has the honour to sit.'

Over the autumn of 1977, Ministry press leaks suggested Labour Education Secretary Shirley Williams favoured a Bill making parental choice the only allocation factor in school entry. As a co-opted expert on an education subcommittee of Labour's national executive, Caroline Benn met with the Parliamentary Party's Education and Science

Group to discuss the matter. In her view, parental choice would exaggerate inequalities between schools, as well as between children of parents who are knowledgeable and those who are not. Standing in for the subcommittee's chair, Benn was alarmed to find protection of admission 'based wholly or partly on selection by reference to ability or aptitude' enshrined in the proposed legislation. As another co-opted education expert, Tyrell Burgess put it, 'The Labour Government could not find a way to legislate to end selection in 12 years, but in 12 days it has found a way to bring it back' (C. Benn to B. Simon, CB 6).

Williams favoured 'diversity among schools, as distinct from a selection-based pecking order' as she put it in her 2010 autobiography. She palpably regretted that the Labour left and the National Union of Teachers disagreed. 'Led by Tony and Caroline Benn and quietly supported by one of my junior ministers, Margaret Jackson, they opposed my proposals' she said (Williams, 2010, p. 237). Tony Benn's diary records his intervention at Cabinet level and the Bill's absence begged the question who is Education Secretary in the House of Commons (T. Benn, 1991, p.231). Armed with a cutting from *The Times Educational Supplement* headed 'Choice Row Splits Labour', St John-Stevas described a picture 'it does not do her justice, but it is not bad - underneath which there appears "*Shirley Williams: I will*". On the other side, there is another picture, rather more unflattering, underneath which there appears "*Caroline Benn: You won't.*" He thought it 'bad enough' having 'Macbeth in the Cabinet, we do not want Lady Macbeth around as well' ('Choice' file, CB 6; *Hansard* 4 November 1977).

Between 1965 and Labour's defeat in 1979, the number of schools called 'comprehensive' grew from five to just under 80 percent. Edward Short regretted back-up plans for legislation were dropped and thought the failure to provide extra money to assist the change meant that 'comprehensive reorganisation was often a botched-up job from the start' (Short, 1989, p. 108). Since the comprehensive ideal had not been fully achieved, Caroline Benn wrote an Education Act for the Hillcole Group of socialist educationalists and teachers to address the task (J. Holland to J. Martin, 15 May 2015). 'Equality does not require everyone to be alike – or choose the "same" - but in a public education service it should require equal rights to experience common education during compulsory years and an equal chance to choose from the same range of alternatives before and after' (Hillcole Group, 1991, p. 180).

Caroline Benn argued comprehensive education was the right way and for her the problem was how to get there. The fatalistic notions of the intelligence testers concerned her most and she contested meritocratic assumptions about the cultural contexts of learning and teaching that renewed emphasis then (and now) on the exceptional and the clever (Owens and St Croix, 2020). As a school governor, she supported the internal dynamic of comprehensive re-organisation as Holland Park began to engage with the problem of how to devise a curriculum through which all children can learn (see Hargreaves, 1982; B. Barker, 1986; Goodson, 1988). Always she stressed the educational deficiencies of selective education, urging the need to legislate to realize the learning community explicit in the comprehensive ideal.

Conclusion

This article reconstructs and strives to learn from past progressive policy and those in education who tried to go beyond meritocracy. Their purpose was to challenge the myth that educational potential is a fixed quantity and dismantle all the structures rooted in that fallacy, while facilitating practices that enabled everyone to enjoy a full education. For scholar-activists like Michael Armstrong, Caroline Benn, Clyde Chitty, Ann and Howard Glennerster, Dennis Marsden, Robin Pedley and Brian Simon, the case for educational legislation in a changing society was irrevocable. They wanted an education system which was varied and flexible enough to develop fully all the different abilities and talents which children possess and want to use. Their policy recommendations were studded with research that showed most children could benefit from the abolition of streaming, rigid syllabuses and selection, and none need suffer; all children could benefit from less authoritarian teaching and from learning in more democratic situations, which would give them a measure of autonomy.

To return to my central questions, Labour's meritocrats and social engineers thought the comprehensive 'efficiency with equality' programme was an idea whose time had come in 1964. It is arguable that progressive campaigners underestimated the forces ranged against them. For in challenging the myth of the meritocracy and the pre-eminence of the cognitive-intellectual curriculum, they threatened the enormous weight of historical tradition embedded in the case for spending very much more on the education of a privileged minority. Change occurred in the way schools were run and more children were better educated in the 1970s than in the 1950s or the 1900s, but these educational pioneers did not manage to transcend the measuring rod of external qualifications and conventional curriculum diet, which assumes that many schools and their pupils must be of lesser worth. Then (and now) the retention of grammar schools with their power to reject and select on social as well as on academic grounds, meant the debate over comprehensive success was (and is) a contest fought on a systematically sloping playing field.

In 1979, Howard Glennerster identified positive features in the policy climate. 'Now at least standards of education for the ordinary child are on the political agenda' he said. 'In a more equal society a diversity of gifts would be recognized in their own right and that is what the best comprehensive schools are seeking to achieve' (Glennerster, 1979, p. 54). At the time of writing, a global pandemic makes a fundamental reappraisal of the purpose of education and of the needs of society and of individuals' central questions. Alternate futures are possible. We should re-visit the dreams of those advocates of comprehensive education and the sites of possibility they created. For they well understood the illusion and cultural power of the idea of meritocratic selection in the sense that whilst it promises opportunity, it discards or under-estimates those left behind.

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² At the time of writing, grammar school exams were the only ones still going ahead during the coronavirus disruption (M. Benn, 25 April 2020).