

**Reorganisation Revisited
or
That's Another Fine Mess ...**

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Comprehensive systems of secondary education have now been introduced by all but a handful of Local Education Authorities, and the passionate debate which once surrounded the issue has largely died away. Arguments on both sides of the debate were often confused, low on educational substance and high on political posturing. There was, however, within the original concept a germ of nobility: if educational resources and educational opportunity could be more equitably distributed and if a socially divisive system, implying success for a minority and failure for the majority, could be replaced by a socially cohesive system then there is surely no doubt on which side the angels must be. Would that life were so simple! Advocates on both sides of the debate have produced statistics which prove conclusively that:

1. academic standards are higher within comprehensive systems than within selective systems;
2. academic standards are no higher within comprehensive systems than within selective systems;
3. we are a less socially divided nation as a result of the introduction of comprehensive schools;
4. we are not a less socially divided nation as a result of the introduction of comprehensive schools.

The comprehensive debate remains as sterile as ever it was. Objective comparisons between extant selective and comprehensive systems are difficult because the few selective systems still remaining are not necessarily typical, and comparisons within areas between current comprehensive systems and the selective systems which they replaced are invalid since the time context is different. The question to which we might usefully address ourselves is not whether comprehensive schools have delivered the goods but what goods they have delivered and whether we are satisfied with them.

One of the first problems to confront authorities introducing comprehensive schools was the problem of size. The wider the spread of ability entering a school, it is argued, the larger that school needs to be. This is especially the case with the extremes of the ability range, to provide appropriately for whom the total intake must be sufficiently large to ensure adequate numbers in each group. There has, therefore, for apparently sound educational reasons, been a tendency to create larger schools as the country reorganised. There is considerable variety of practice, but an ideal type has emerged consisting of some eight forms of entry and a total roll of over a thousand pupils. These schools, especially those purpose built rather than having been cobbled together from existing premises, often look impressive because of their size and the concentration of resources. Those in the upper and middle management within these institutions talk eloquently, proudly and interminably about their ingenious academic and pastoral care systems and the concern for the individual which these enshrine.

Beneath the superficial gloss applied by those who have made it or hope to make it within the promotion system, however, there is much disquiet and disillusion amongst the other ranks in the staffroom. The current low state of morale in the teaching profession is not solely the product of madhouse economics and the 30% plus devaluation of teachers' salaries since the great and good Lord Houghton established his universally accepted relativities some ten years ago. Neither is it solely the product of a tragic level of youth unemployment although this must inevitably affect us as it affects our pupils. There is also a less clearly perceived and articulated but very real sense that even with these two problems bearing down on us we still could and should do better. The essential failure is a function of the increase in size arising from the increased diversity of intake. Economists may applaud the reduction of unit costs arising from economies of scale, but educationists must question the appropriateness of models based on manufacturing industry. Whilst schools cannot operate in isolation from economic reality, education is too important to be controlled entirely by the dictates of crude political economy.

It is becoming increasingly accepted that education should be concerned more with process than with content. Rather than being concerned with imparting esoteric knowledge about, for example, the calculation of the surface area of improbably shaped objects, teachers are in the business of fostering a wide range of strategies and skills. These strategies and skills complement and reinforce those learned elsewhere and are relevant to the successful adaptation of young people to the overall social situation. To be effective much of this skill-fostering process requires detailed knowledge and close contact over a protracted period of time. This degree of intimacy is a natural function of small size but is rapidly destroyed within the alienating environment of large institutions. We have created, and are continuing to create, schools which are less caring and less efficient than schools should be.

When a school is too large to assemble together in the hall it is too large to foster a corporate identity. When a school is too large for the Head to know each pupil, not just to know their names but to know them as

people, the school is too large to exercise really effective influence and the role of the Head is irreparably diminished. Heads cannot delegate their personal contact, however much complex pastoral care systems in the fashionable horizontal or vertical modes may be promoted as evidence that they can. The current vogue for management training for Headteachers and senior staff tends to see the leadership role as being one of control of staff and resources and programmes. We shall no doubt soon be trained to refer to children as units. The skills of yesteryear, the interpersonal skills of teaching and influencing rather than of managing and manipulating quite properly have no place in the new order; they are becoming inappropriate to current institutions, and education is becoming so much the poorer for it. What we wanted from reorganisation were garden suburbs; what reorganisation has delivered are educational tower blocks. Supercomp has arrived.

The changes in management style brought about by the increasing size and complexity of secondary schools have further contributed to the problems of alienation, frustration and communications failure which are characteristic of our larger schools. The management of Supercomps requires a special type of Head, Deputy Head and Head of Department; ambitious, progressive, dynamic and well versed in the latest curriculum development and management techniques. Enter Superhead, Superdep and Superhod. They come in two basic variants: bearded and clean shaven. Most of the men belong to the former category and most of the women to the latter. They may be recognised by their absolute conviction about and readiness to comment on every imaginable topic and by their further unshakeable conviction that they are God's gift to education. They communicate in a special language: Edjarg. They are programmed to innovate: trendiness rules O.K. Under their bold leadership schools are undergoing a radical change of philosophical emphasis: away from preserving and transmitting a cultural heritage and towards participating and preparing for life in the next century. It is an environment of permanent revolution, a world in which Trotsky would have felt comfortable. It is a world, however, in which increasing numbers of classroom teachers and children find themselves confused, bored and depressed by the drab, grey sadness of all this exhilarating novelty.

The bleak philistinism of the new style school managers, with their systems analysis and flow charts, has been applied with ruthless logic to the educational issue of the moment. Issues come and issues go in education, but current concern is predominantly about curriculum reform. To a modern, high-tech progressive, the way forward is obvious: Britain's industrial output and share of world export markets must increase; we must beat the Japanese. They would regard as naive, bordering on the imbecile, such questions as why we should so concern ourselves about beating the Japanese, or why we need a higher per capita income or gross national product than we now have, and how we individually or nationally would use the additional money, and whether there are not more urgent priorities, such as the development of a compassionate and rational society to ensure that our pupils have a future to inherit.

The curriculum implications of the obsession about higher rates of economic growth are that increased time and resources must be devoted to technical and vocational education. Thus we are witnessing a powerful lurch in this direction, in part financed by a slush fund controlled by the Manpower Services Commission. Since time is finite and resources are under constraint, the expansion of one facet of the curriculum is inevitably at the expense of others, and the major victim of the current exercise is the liberal, humanistic tradition in English education. The reform is being fostered through changes in the political structure of education: there is more specific direction from the Department of Education and Science to Local Education Authorities, more specific direction from L.E.A.s to schools, and more specific direction from schools to pupils. At the latter level there is a worrying incidence of pupils being frustrated by inflexible options systems which force, for example, pupils whose abilities, interests and future careers lie within the artistic, expressionistic fields being required to follow courses in the sciences and technology, in pursuit of what is called balance. It really does appear to be a case of never mind the quality, feel the width.

It is interesting to note, in the light of the national obsession about the Japanese, that their system of secondary education is based on a broad, general course with the vocational element consisting of an additional tertiary layer. Perhaps those fiendish Orientals do have something to teach us.