A Comprehensive Vision of Education

Lecturer: Geoff Whitty

I am honoured that the Socialist Educational Association should have asked me to deliver the first Caroline Benn Memorial lecture. Caroline and Tony Benn recognised early on that decisions made by one family affect the life-chances of others and hence that education policy is not just something to be made for other people's children but also something that should have consequences for decisions about the education of one's own.

There is no doubt that Caroline Benn had a comprehensive vision of education and, although the focus of much of her work was the quest for comprehensive secondary schooling, this was part of a much broader vision for education and society. But because the struggle for comprehensive secondary schooling was so much at the centre of her achievements, I shall focus mainly on that particular aspect of education policy.

Research on academically able children

I am going to start by quoting some findings from research I've carried out over the past twenty years with Tony Edwards and Sally Power. Our original study in the 1980s was widely cited as showing that very few genuinely working class children were benefiting from the assisted places scheme, which allowed able children from families of modest means to attend academically selective private schools.

I want to dwell today on subsequent work growing out of that study. We had four groups of children identified as academically able at age 11, which was, of course, one of the eligibility criteria for the assisted places scheme: a group who participated in the scheme, another group who attended the same highly academic selective independent schools as full fee-payers, a third group who attended state grammar schools in the same area and a fourth who attended comprehensive schools, again in the same area.

We were able to follow the progress of these four groups from age eleven onwards and our most recent study found them in their mid-twenties.

Our study showed that the mean score for those students who obtained A-levels in the elite independent sector was 23.1 points compared to 17.6 points in the state sector. However, overall point scores are potentially a misleading comparator, and mean scores per subject taken indicate a somewhat smaller difference. Thus, the mean subject grade for our independent schools was 7.7 (just below grade B), 7.2 for state grammar schools and 6.5 (just over grade C) for state comprehensives.

At first sight, these findings may not seem a great advertisement for comprehensive education. They suggest that comprehensive school pupils of high academic ability do rather less well at A-level than their peers in state grammar schools and both do less well than those in academically selective private schools.

Our study also showed that those from the private schools were more likely to attend high status universities, read high status subjects and then enter the labour market in higher paid and more prestigious jobs. Today's brightest young people often have relatively successful careers whether they have attended public or private, selective or non-selective schools, when measured by crude indices such as entry to higher education or entry to professional and managerial prizes. But it apparently remains the case that certain choices at 11 are still likely to bring a significantly greater chance of success than others, particularly when competing for the ‘glittering prizes’ associated with elite

universities and elite occupations.

So it is perhaps hardly surprising that our findings were featured on the front page of The Times as showing that it was well worth ambitious parents spending £10,000 a year on their children's education. But, if you look at the figures another way, what is quite remarkable is how small the differences at A-level were, when you consider a whole range of factors that distinguish state comprehensive schools from the sorts of elite private schools in our study, whether we're talking about the nature of their mission, the nature of their intakes, their class sizes, the qualifications of their teachers, their facilities or whatever.

When you take these factors into account, it may well be that high status universities looking for the brightest and the best would have done better to sponsor more of those who had gained just slightly lower grades at comprehensive schools rather than those with straight As at private schools. When you think about the differences between the schools, it makes the lifetime career benefits of that very slight difference at A-level seem even more unjust.

Academic success of Comprehensives

The other thing that is remarkable, given their differences in mission, is that within the sector differences in our study is hidden the fact some of the comprehensive schools actually performed better than some of the private and grammar schools.

A similar set of thoughts strikes me when looking at the conflicting evidence that has recently been appearing about the relative performance of academically able children in comprehensive and grammar schools.

Overall, as we indicated in a study published a couple of years ago, the evidence suggests that comprehensive schools benefit most children but possibly not the most academically able. But the fact that the difference is so marginal, and that successive studies by David Jesson and NFER can contradict each other on this point, is a remarkable testament to the academic success of comprehensive schools.

If the most able children in comprehensive schools can perform neck and neck, and in at least some cases outperform those in schools which have a mission that is geared directly to their needs and not much else, how come it is the comprehensive schools that are presented as failing?

When you add to the equation the fact that comprehensive schools are part of the inclusion agenda as well the standards agenda, it is particularly puzzling that the present government should appear so suspicious of comprehensive schools. Rather, one would expect it to be celebrating their achievements. Instead, in the name of modernisation, it is suggested that we can now go beyond the comprehensive dream by introducing a raft of specific policies that, taken together, arguably constitute a retreat from comprehensive secondary education in all but name.

Looking forward positively

I am not going to mount a full-scale critique of this government's education policies. Instead, I am going to look forward by invoking Erik Olin Wright's concept of 'real utopias'. Wright takes the view that 'what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but itself shaped by our visions'. He also talks of 'utopian destinations that have accessible waystations' and which can 'inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change'.

So I want to use this idea to try and think through how we might maintain the sort of vision that Caroline offered us but recognise that realising that vision means starting from our current 'imperfect conditions' rather than where we might have expected to be by now.

Back in the 1960s 1 expected that well before the turn of the century we would have had a fully comprehensive system, no demand for private schools even if they still existed and, indeed, probably no single-sex or denominational schools. But we are certainly not there and society has probably changed sufficiently for some of those issues not to be quite as straightforward as 1 thought they were.

But it would not serve Caroline's memory well for supporters of comprehensive education to feel defeated by all this and appear demoralised. As I've indicated, we have no reason to feel embarrassed, rather we should find ways of pushing forward.

So, where are we now and how might we work with it? While many of New labour's policies have been negative for the cause of comprehensive education, a few of them give us cause for hope that there is still something to build on - including some of the less noticed aspects of the latest White Paper, Schools: achieving success.

Narrowing the achievement gap

In 1997, of course, Labour inherited not only a system that was being systematically dismantled and fragmented, but one in which the differences between the best and the worst schools were increasing and in which there was growing social polarisation between different types of schools.

For those of us who were highly critical of the equity effects of the earlier Tory policies, it is therefore particularly good to see that New Labour has begun to narrow the achievement gap between children from different social groups. And it is good that Labour is planning to make closing that gap an even bigger priority in its second term. While the standards agenda tended to dominate the first term, the inclusion agenda does seem to be coming more into view in the second term at least in the rhetoric. There is though still a huge task ahead to increase both the absolute and relative achievements of disadvantaged groups and make sure the benefits of improvement extend to all minority ethnic groups and not just some of them.

Inclusion, as part of the comprehensive vision

Inclusion is not just a matter of engaging disadvantaged groups. As Tony Giddens has pointed out, 'social exclusion' is a dual process. It operates at the 'top' as well as the 'bottom' of society, with the wealthy often excluding themselves voluntarily from state-provided services. Certainly, the ruling and upper middle classes in England have traditionally ‘self-excluded’ themselves from mainstream educational provision by their use of elite private education. The rapid growth of the middle classes since the second world war did not, however, lead to a similar growth in the size of that sector of education. So, although some of the newer fractions of the middle classes have made increasing use of private sector provision, others have successfully colonised mainstream public education in ways that make it ‘safe’ for their own children.

This is perhaps one of the reasons for the re-emergence of differentiated forms of public provision and for the 'reinvented traditionalism' that we find in some comprehensive schools. But the effect - and sometimes the intention - has too often been to exclude 'other people's children' from the best public provision. And that is why social inclusion in the comprehensive vision must involve social and academic balance in a way that seems to have been forgotten by New Labour.

For those of us committed to comprehensive education, it is important to ensure that the middle classes see mainstream public education as the right place for their children rather than opt out into their own schools, whether public or private. We need to have schools that meet the aspirations of all children and also provide that social and academic mix that has been shown to be essential for maximising the achievement of all.

We know that there are comprehensive schools that perform with the best as far as academic achievement is concerned, while also doing many other things that private and grammar schools don't. The aim must surely be to learn from those schools and help others to do the same, rather than finding ways for pupils to escape from them.

For, as Michael Young points out, exclusion 'at the top' and 'at the bottom' are interdependent in quite specific ways - families with high enough incomes to afford alternatives avoid the state secondary schools in many inner London boroughs precisely because many of the students in such schools are from families who would on any criteria be classified as being among the excluded ‘at the bottom’. The failing quality of public services in the inner cities is thus partly an outcome of the withdrawal of

support for them by growing numbers of relatively better-off people.

The inner city problem

In boroughs where better-off families continue to use public secondary schools, they use the other mechanism of 'exclusion at the top', such as moving house into the catchment of what they perceive to be the best state schools. In extreme cases, Young suggests, whole boroughs come to be regarded as unsafe for middle class children. The failing quality of public services in large swathes of the inner cities is thus partly an outcome of the withdrawal of support for them by growing numbers of relatively advantaged people.

School choice policies have often facilitated this strategic withdrawal of the middle classes, making it even more difficult for schools in those areas to succeed because, as Margaret Maden has indicated, it is important for such schools to have a "critical mass" of more engaged, broadly "pro-school" children.

Meanwhile, the sponsorship of a few 'meritorious' working class children into the suburban schools of the middle classes, whether public or private, helps to legitimate the system without threatening the 'critical mass' of middle class children in such schools. It might be concluded that the solution to working class failure in some inner city comprehensive schools could be an Assisted Places Scheme targeted more effectively than the Tory one on working class students, and involving schools capable of retaining them into beyond age 16.

However, the broader problem of working class failure is barely addressed by the existence of a privileged route out for the few, whether via assisted places, grammar schools or specialist schools and, indeed, their very existence can serve to reduce the pressure for a more fundamental reform of provision. Individual success stories of the sort that politicians like to cite as evidence of the success of their policies - such as their annual photoshoots during the 1980s with some of the few unambiguously working class pupils in the assisted places scheme - do not address the issue of structural inequalities and even can have the effect of legitimating them.

Specialist Schools

In this respect, the government's specialist schools policy must be of great concern to supporters of comprehensive education. It is certainly muddled if not disingenuous. Is the policy about selecting and sponsoring individual children for a meritocratic society? Schools were certainly to be allowed to select a proportion of their intake, but now we're told most of them don't so it isn't a significant part of the policy.

The policy is clearly about improving schools, but is it about improving all schools or just some schools? At first specialist schools were to be a minority of schools in all areas, then not, then the numbers were capped in some areas, then 50% were to be specialist schools and now apparently any school can at least aspire to be, one.

When back in 1997, Estelle Morris announced Labour's conversion to the Tories' specialist schools policy, it seemed better than the Conservatives' version in that Labour wanted nonspecialist local schools to benefit in various ways. But Ofsted surveys show that their role as a resource for the wider community has yet to be fully realised.

When it's pointed out that some specialist schools are not strong in their specialism, and rather weaker than some of their neighbours, we're told that it's ethos rather than specialism that will make the difference. But when you dare to suggest that it might just be the extra funding that counts, you are accused of cynicism.

Ironically, we've recently been given an explanation for this apparent muddle that suggests that a rather cynical calculation on the part of New Labour may be at the heart of the policy - but for motives of which we might even approve. Gill Penlington of the Social Market Foundation has argued - without any apparent sense of irony – that ‘it is unusual (for a government) to base an entire policy on spin’. But in the case of specialist schools, she goes on, 'spin may be the most effective way to achieve two

antagonistic goals: encouraging the middle classes to use the state sector while simultaneously raising levels of provision in Britain's worst-off communities'. I hope she is right, since that might help the creation of inclusive comprehensive schools.

I have argued elsewhere that Excellence in Cities may have this effect if handled carefully, though we must constantly guard against aspects like the "Gifted and Talented" strand being colonised by particular social groups. Much the same is true of specialist schools where some of the figures on free school meal takeup certainly raise questions about the extent of their social inclusivity.

None of this is to deny the very real achievements of many specialist schools, but as long as the basis of their success is open to question, there are entirely legitimate concerns about the potentially divisive effects of such schools.

For a government apparently committed to evidence-formed policy to suggest that there are not such concerns is extremely worrying. There is one paragraph in the White Paper, Schools: achieving success, which I find particularly disturbing in this respect. It effectively says: 'There are those who have said that specialist schools will create a two- tier system. They won't. End of story.' This reminds me of when back in the 1980s Michael Fish said, 'Some people have suggested that there is a hurricane heading this way. There isn't'. And we all know what happened that night.

1 am sure that the government does not intend specialist status to be divisive, but the research evidence it cites is not at all robust, as my colleague Harvey Goldstein has demonstrated. Indeed, the studies I've seen apparently supporting each side of the argument are methodologically weak and we really need to employ multi-level modelling approaches to be sure about both the basis of their success and their effects on other schools.

Faith Schools

There are also legitimate concerns about faith schools becoming socially divisive. Many do appear to be successful in enhancing social capital and achievement within the groups who attend them, but what we also need to know is whether and how equivalent forms of social capital might be constructed in non-denominational schools and among different populations. And, even then, we need to be sure that we are developing forms of social capital that are inclusive rather than exclusive.

Diversity the name of the game

Despite the poor research base for many of these policies, 1 have little doubt that diversity will remain the name of the game for the foreseeable future. And advocates of comprehensive education have never actually denied the importance of a degree of diversity - it was not us who coined the phrase 'bog standard'. We all know that each comprehensive school has its own ethos and we celebrate that. And we all find ways of responding to diversity within schools. But we must find ways of preventing legitimate differences becoming unjustifiable inequalities.

Whatever the mix of different types of schools, it remains vitally important to rebuild a comprehensive system of secondary education. This must involve curbing the excesses of the quasimarkets introduced by the Conservatives and barely touched by Labour. To avoid diversity producing a hierarchy, all schools in an area will need to work together in the interests of optimum provision for all pupils.

My own view is that genuine collegiality among schools would be much easier if they were all put on a similar legal and budgetary footing, whatever private and voluntary sector partners are involved in their governance. And given the government's current proposals to loosen up mainstream governance arrangements, there is even less justification for having different school statuses.

Admissions Policy

The key issue is admissions policies and we should push hard on that. Recently, I was shown some

really startling figures showing the extent to which social polarisation between schools correlates with the proportion of schools controlling their own admission policies. While the government still appears unwilling to address that issue head on, 1 am pleased to see that it proposes to make local admissions forums mandatory, something many of us have been advocating for some time in the face of clear evidence of abuse. But I fear it will need far more than that to encourage some schools to be genuinely comprehensive.

For all its faults, ILEA's banding arrangement prevented extreme polarisation, while before the Greenwich judgement, some degree of planning could take place at LEA level. Even with the present system, with multiple admissions authorities, one would have thought that a government so imbued with the audit culture, would, at the very least, institute a far more rigorous and regular audit of admissions practices.

The Need for Collaborative approaches

Even if we achieved fair admissions policies, a comprehensive vision goes much further than an aggregate of comprehensive schools and involves the creation of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to education. So, although 1 have focused up to now heavily on issues of academic and social balance, 1 now want to touch on other elements that would characterise a genuinely comprehensive system of the sort that I am sure Caroline envisaged.

With greater emphasis on collaboration rather than competition between schools, there ought, for example, to be scope for experimentation with new ways of addressing the democratic deficit in education. It is to be hoped that the proposed new approaches to school governance will facilitate this.

It is certainly good to see growing recognition by government of the relationship between education and other areas of social policy. Education Action Zones have provided some examples of multi-agency working between education, health and welfare services to tackle multiple disadvantage. However, 1 suspect the New Community Schools initiative in Scotland may well provide a better model for comprehensive school-based services and greater community involvement in schools. These schools are intended to be genuinely inclusive schools, both socially and educationally, and it is worth noting that greater inclusion rather than greater specialisation is seen as the future for comprehensive education in Scotland. So 1 think we should be pleased to see from the White Paper that there are now to be some pilot 'extended schools' of this nature in England.

The comprehensive curriculum

Then there is the question of the comprehensive curriculum, one of the key challenges for the comprehensive school identified by David Hargreaves in the 1980s. The government is now doing something about the curriculum at Key Stage 3, but I'm not entirely convinced that it's the right thing. In my view, Labour should look to enrich rather than narrow the curriculum, while certainly making it more challenging and engaging.

The introduction of education for citizenship into the national curriculum and its various PSE and healthy school initiatives are part of the answer. But there is a real danger of neglecting areas such as the arts, a development which is not in anyone's long term interests, least of all the socially disadvantaged. I am therefore relieved that it is envisaged in the White Paper that the Key Stage 3 strategy will eventually be rolled out to all subjects and not just literacy, numeracy, science and ICT, but there is no detail or timeline attached to developments in the other subjects. In the meantime, the proposed enrichment activities are welcome, but we must not allow them to legitimate a narrowing of the core curriculum. And most of all, we need to have a view of what the curriculum is for, perhaps by picking up on David Hargreaves' ideas on encouraging creativity and innovation.

At Key Stage 4 and beyond, it is good to see that a debate is to be opened up on the 14-19 curriculum. But the educational and social dangers of early tracking into vocational and academic routes have not gone away. And they certainly will not do so if institutional arrangements and the examination system continue to reinforce the traditional hierarchies of esteem that the government claims to want to get

away from. If we are really to have flexibility and choice alongside continuity and progression in the 14-19 phase, we may have to rethink the role of GCSE beyond allowing a few individual children to skip it or take it early. And an 'overarching award' post-16 will not change much if everything under the arch is effectively left unchanged and unchallenged.

Restoring creativity to teaching

Finally, I must mention the creation of a teaching force for comprehensive education. Comprehensive school teachers do a fantastic job, especially when you consider the multiple demands made on them. Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s managed to harness the commitment and creativity of teachers for the comprehensive project, including some of us in this room.

Incentives and rewards for creativity and innovation will need to be put back into the system and give teaching some of the excitement as well as the challenge that those of my generation felt when we started teaching in comprehensive schools in the 1960s.

Too many of our brightest young people today are put off teaching because it is seen as a bureaucratic rather than a creative profession. The government now claims to be more committed to valuing its teachers and offering them greater flexibility. However, there is still a real danger of creating a two-tier profession. For example, one reading of the fast-track developments is that those who show themselves willing to manage on behalf of the state in a marketised culture of schooling will be given enhanced status, rewards and freedoms, while others are subjected to a highly regulated mode of control. There is a further danger implicit in the White Paper, which suggests greater flexibility for successful schools, while maintaining tight control of those in challenging circumstances. This could lead to the most creative teachers avoiding the schools that arguably need them the most.

Achieving the comprehensive vision The White Paper does not present a coherent vision and its overall message could easily be read as writing off comprehensive education as an outdated concept. And, while I can - with some effort - already identify here and there aspects that might be used to build again towards the comprehensive vision, we must convince government that Caroline's vision is not only desirable and achievable but also the only real way of achieving a truly world-class education service for the twenty-first century.

Back in 1996, Thirty Years On suggested that, despite the setbacks of the Tory years, achieving the comprehensive vision remained in sight, if only an incoming Labour government would seize the opportunity and keep its nerve. As we know, that didn't quite happen. But I hope the new Secretary of State will see those of us who ask where is the vision, or point out contradictions in policy, not as, whingers and cynics - to cite David Blunkett's notorious phrase but rather as critical friends who can help the government to build waystations en route to a truly comprehensive future.

I hope that, on the way, the government's often declared commitment to evidence-informed policy making will be increasingly in evidence during its second term of office, not least with regard to its policies on specialist and faith schools. Only if that happens is Labour's 1997 commitment to 'high quality education for the many rather than excellence for a few' likely to be achieved, and the realisation of Caroline's comprehensive vision of education brought a step nearer under Labour.