

Background

As we saw in the previous lesson, as British society entered the 20th Century, we had begun to introduce a system of formal state-funded education – with provision (whatever the quality) available to all children up until the age of 11. The debate that had led up to this introduction, however, was less than sympathetic to the working class and even the arguments in support of free education provision tended to focus on either improving the skills of the workforce or preventing revolution. Some of the dimensions involved include:

- **Creating a more skilled workforce.** Many employers believed that the new industrial society needed a workforce which was numerate and literate in order to cope with the complexities of new technology. There was a particular fear that without education, Britain would fall behind its rivals.
- **Improve the effectiveness of the army.** Britain had just fought the Crimean War (1854-6) with massive casualties. This was seen as partly due to inexperience and poor tactics – better trained soldiers (who count read, write and count) might fare better.
- **To re-socialise the feckless poor.** Many Victorians thought that the lower classes had brought poverty on themselves through loose morals and excessive drinking. They needed to be taught to live more responsible and respectable life.
- **To reduce the level of street crime.** Remember *Oliver Twist*? Many felt that compulsory schooling would get young pickpockets “off the streets” thus reducing petty theft.
- **To ward off the threat of revolution.** The upper classes feared the “tide of socialism” that was “sweeping” through Europe. Free education could, on the one hand, make the ruling classes appear generous, and, on the other, serve to **ideologically control** the masses. They would learn to respect authority, follow instructions and conform to rules.
- **To provide a “human right”.** Some liberal thinkers felt that education could improve the life experience of all citizens, including the working classes – and make society a fairer place. It should be emphasised, however, that this was a minority opinion.

 **Think about your experience of education. Can you see how any of these priorities might still be of influence?**

The 1944 Butler Reform Act

During the Second World War, the political landscape began to shift, and liberal ideas began to grow. There was a mounting opinion that the Britain that was to be rebuilt after the war should be an ideal and fair society. Rab Butler was the man charged with designing the new system. There is a legend when Butler took his proposals for reform to Churchill, the prime-minister sent him away, indicating that his pet cat – which was sat at his feet – was doing more for the war effort by keeping his feet warm and therefore saving coal. Butler took this reprimand to heart – ignoring Churchill and pushed forward with the reform anyway. The resulting act dramatically changed the system of education in Britain and, significantly, set up a Ministry of Education – firmly establishing state-provision of education as a government priority.

Aims

Underpinning the 1944 Education Reform Act (E.R.A.) were two main objectives:

1. To create a meritocracy via equality of educational opportunity.
2. To create a highly trained and efficient workforce by transferring vocational skills.

Key Terminology

Meritocracy: A system in which individuals are rewarded on the basis of merit or ability and effort, and not according to social background

At this point, it is relevant to make the distinction between **equality of opportunity** (providing all students with the same chances for educational achievement) and equality of outcome (aiming to produce students who have equal ability).

 **Does/did equality of educational opportunity exist in your school? Try to justify your answer.**

Changes to the Education System

The Butler Act made sweeping reforms throughout the entire education system. Firstly, the elementary schools were re-branded as the primary sector – providing universal education between the ages of 5 and 11. To reduce the cost of realising this provision, the government made a deal with the existing church schools, bringing them under state control. In extension to this, a **secondary sector** was established to extend universal compulsory education to the age of 15 (it wasn't until the 70's that the leaving age was raised to 16). Further and Higher Education sectors were formalised to provide education beyond the compulsory age of leaving education.

 **What do you think might have been involved in the “deal” made by the government with the church? How can the legacy of this “deal” be seen in the modern school system?**

The Triangle of Responsibility

Under the 1944 ERA, three main groups were given responsibility for the provision of education. Central government took the responsibility for gathering taxes and allocating resources to local government. At a local level, councils were obliged to set up Education committees or **Local Education Authorities (LEAs)**, who were to ensure that enough places were available for all children in their area. The LEAs were also in charge of deciding on the **curriculum** to be studied within their schools – the only thing that central government demanded was that all students received some Religious Instruction and that a collective Christian act of worship was observed daily within schools. Finally, headteachers were given the responsibility of deciding how their money was to be spent and of ensuring that the curriculum specified by the LEA was delivered.

The Tripartite System

The biggest reform of the 1944 ERA was, therefore, in aiming to provide a fair and free system of secondary education. The pre-war work of Cyril Burt – the then Chief Government Statistician - was highly influential in this area. He had argued that children had natural aptitudes, inclinations and abilities – an academic / vocational divide, which mirrored the growing economic

split between professional and manual work. Consequently, it was argued that offering a “one-size-fits-all” education system would be unsuitable. Consequently a three-part (or tri-partite) secondary system was established consisting of...

- **Grammar schools** for the academically inclined;
- **Secondary Technicals** for the creative / artistic;
- **Secondary Moderns** for everyone else.

A key point was that none of the schools were supposed to be “better” than the others – there was intended to be **parity of esteem**. The slogan adopted was that the three types of school would be different, but equal.

In order to decide which school a student was most suited to, students sat an IQ at the end of primary school – called the 11 plus. Young argues that the concept of meritocracy at the time could be summed up as:

$$\text{IQ} + \text{EFFORT} = \text{REWARD}$$

Key Terminology

- **Parity of Esteem:** The 1944 Reform Act aimed to create three different types of schools that shared equal prestige.

The Tripartite System...



Note:

Technical schools required lots of specialist materials and equipment. Consequently, they were very expensive to set up – which means that they never really got established. As a result the tripartite system really became a bi-partite system (Grammar Schools and Secondary Moderns).

Evaluating the 1944 Reform Act

The biggest changes in education since the war have taken place in the secondary schools. The grammar schools were made free schools entirely for children of high ability whereas previously they combined clever scholarship winners with children of less ability from the middle classes whose parents could afford the subsidised fees.

In England we have always, until very recently, had different types of schools for different types of children. There they were intended to learn different groups of subjects, because it was thought that children came in layers - clever children (17%) who were able to study classics, mathematics, foreign languages, science and other 'difficult' subjects at grammar schools, not-so-clever children who were to do technical subjects at technical schools (5%) and then the great mass who were to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, able to live life fully doubtless, but not with aid of books.

There is still a great deal of hostility to the secondary modern school. Allocation to a secondary modern school is almost universally regarded as a 'failure' in the 11 plus. Despite the fact that selection at 11 is supposed to be by objective tests of ability and attainment, the grammar school still consists to a large degree of children of the middle class to the exclusion of children from the working class. Because of this the reputation of the secondary modern schools has lagged far behind that of the grammar schools.

(adapted from 'Education for Tomorrow' by John Vaizey, revised edition, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, pp47-49)

There is no doubt that the 11 plus test made considerable mistakes, that very many secondary modern school pupils can undertake academic work and that the arrangements for transfer (from secondary modern to grammar school) within the tripartite system were unsatisfactory. My five years as a secondary modern school head convinced me that the view that secondary schools (in the tripartite system) were equal but different was poppycock. The recent Schools Council Enquiry into Young School Leavers shows that parents see schools largely as places which train their sons and daughters for better

jobs and in this basic requirement the secondary modern schools were and would remain inferior to the grammar schools.

(from 'The Essential Conditions for the Success of a Comprehensive School' by Rhodes Boyson in 'Black Paper 2: The Crisis in Education' edited by C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, The Critical Quarterly Society, London, 1969, p57)

I feel passionate on the issue of comprehensive education because, as a youngster, I was a product of the 11 plus examination. In 1955, I failed the exam and still today remember the trauma, grief and unhappiness it caused. I can remember how, as 11-year-olds, we were called into the school hall and a list was read out of who had passed the exam. When my name was not read out, I was devastated. I can remember running out of the school gates, home. Because I had failed the 11 plus, my mother was distraught and I can recall the feeling of failure. It took many years to get over the trauma. I was fortunate to go to a secondary modern school that took GCEs and it was not until I had successfully passed those exams, that the feeling of failure partially disappeared.

(Gerald Steinberg in 'Guardian', 22.1.1996)

QUESTIONS

1. Why did those who set up the tripartite system believe it would give equal educational opportunities to all students? (5)
2. The 11 plus was not intended to be an examination to pass or fail. Why not? (3)
3. Why was selection for a secondary modern school seen as a 'failure' in the 11 plus? (4)
4. What effect might the public's view of secondary modern schools have on the progress of students who attended them? (3)
5. How can it be argued that the tripartite system helped to maintain and perpetuate the class system? (5)

Use the items above to test your understanding of the 1944 Butler Reform Act. Then, in pairs, compare your answers and try to use them to brainstorm some of the problems with the 1944 ERA.

HOMEWORK!

Find somebody who was educated under the tripartite system and interview them about their experience of the 11-plus.