

As we have seen in the previous lesson, the meritocratic ideal which lay behind the 1944 Education Act was a undoubtedly a good intention but – in practice – it is possible to argue that the tripartite system failed to properly address the effect of social background on individual opportunities. Four main “themes” can be found in this critique:

- **Intelligence Testing** formed the basis of allocation to the three types of school – and such tests are problematic.
- **Parity of Esteem** between the different types of school never happened, leaving grammar schools with disproportionate resources. The failure to set up technical schools also created a situation in which students were seen to either “pass” the 11+ and go to grammar school or “fail” and end up in secondary moderns.
- **Low Self Esteem** was a consequence of “failing” the 11+, and there was a risk that students who were not selected for a grammar school would think they weren’t clever. This might lead to them not trying very hard and having an even lower educational achievement. This is a process called a “self-fulfilling prophecy”.
- **Social Class** still seemed to be a strong factor on academic success. Despite the abolition of fees, working class children were much less likely than middle class children to go to grammar schools. This leads us to question whether the ideal of “equality of opportunity” was actually operating.

These problems led to growing criticisms of the tripartite system, particularly that it reinforced existing class divisions. Unequal life chances were backed up by unequal education. This led many critics to ask: Why not have one type of secondary school for everyone?

Comprehensive Education

A main feature of the tripartite system was that schools operated on a **selective** basis – the eleven plus filtering students into particular schools based on their perceived “aptitudes”. However, by the 1960s there was a call for a more **egalitarian** system that really attempted to establish equality of opportunity for all.

In 1965, the Labour government issued a green paper encouraging Local Education Authorities to move away from the tripartite system and switch to comprehensive schools. These schools would admit students not on the basis of “aptitude” but on their locality – with each school being assigned a **cachment** area, a particular area or neighbourhood from which its pupils are drawn. In practice, the aim was that students within comprehensive schools would be of mixed ability and mixed social background. Without an entrance exam, it was hoped that “equality of opportunity” would be made a reality.

The comprehensive ideal was, in many ways, not a new idea. Some local authorities (for example, Anglesey and parts of London) had already rejected the tripartite system

as **elitist** and opted to set up only one type of school. However, with government encouragement in the 1960s the comprehensive movement really gained pace.



What do you think might be the good points and bad points about the comprehensive system?

The move from selective schooling to comprehensives has been a punctuated by changes in the political party running the country. In general...

- **Labour** has a “left-wing” concern with social justice and equality, which leads them to push forward the comprehensive system.
- **Conservatives** have a concern for providing “appropriate” education for everyone. They see children as having different abilities and talents and consequently require different types of education (and schools).

In 1970 the new conservative government issued a circular allowing grammar schools to exist alongside the comprehensives. This clearly undermined the comprehensive system – there is little point in calling a school comprehensive if the brightest pupils in its area go to a local grammar school. Labour were re-elected, however, and by the time the conservatives next came to power in 1979, over 80% of all secondary school pupils attended comprehensives

Evaluating Comprehensives

It is difficult to properly gauge the success of comprehensives. There are a number of factors we need to consider:

1. What do we mean by “success” – better exam results, improved discipline, higher motivation, a more caring social environment?
2. Success in comparison to what – the tripartite system, the independent sector (“private” schools), the ideals of comprehensive education?

Furthermore, some people have questioned whether a comprehensive system was ever properly established anyway. Private education never went away, and successive conservative governments have allowed selection to continue to take place. Can this situation really be described as a comprehensive system – does it really address the question of equality of opportunity.

Examination Results

Early critics of the comprehensive movement argued that it would lower educational standards. By mixing students of different abilities, it was argued that the “high achievement” of grammar schools would be diluted.

types of school would be associated with a single class (e.g. Grammar schools being “middle class”).

 **Why might this view be seen as a little simplistic?**


Streaming and Setting

One of the major criticisms of the comprehensive ideal is that – in practice – students are not actually taught in mixed groups. Many schools divide students into groups based on their assumed ability. This is sometimes done only for individual groups (called **setting**), but students can also be divided into ability groups across the entire curriculum (called **streaming**).

 **What are your views on setting and streaming?**

Some critics have argued that comprehensives were simply the tripartite system “under one roof”. Why do you think this argument has been made?

	1969 (%)	1983 (%)
One or more A Levels	12	14
5 or more O Levels (but no A Levels)	7	10
Up to 4 O Levels	18	28
O-level or A level passes	37	52
No Qualifications	50	10

 **Does the above table support the view that comprehensives would damage achievement?**

Higher Ability Children

The supporters of the tripartite system argued that comprehensives would hold back more able pupils. They argued that the grammar schools provided the tailored education which would allow them to achieve their best without being hampered by the less able.

The **National Children’s Bureau** examined this concern in a survey of 16,000 children. The researchers looked at their progress through secondary school – testing the pupils’ abilities in English and Maths at 11 and then again at 16.

The results showed that the top 20% of students showed a similar amount of progress regardless of whether they attended grammar or comprehensive schools. In contrast, children of lower ability did slightly better in comprehensives than secondary moderns.

 **What conclusions can be drawn from the above data?**


“Creaming”

As indicated above, in many areas comprehensives have coexisted with grammar and independent schools which have “creamed” – drawn off – many of the brightest students.

 **What might be the implications of this for evaluating the success of comprehensives?**

Social Class

Educational attainment is linked to social class – in general, the higher the class of a student’s parents, the better their results. The comprehensive movement hoped to address this problem, aiming to improve the results of working class children in comparison to their middle class peers.

 **Using the graphs on the next page, evaluate the claim that comprehensives have addressed the difference in educational attainment across the classes.**

By mixing students of different social backgrounds within a school, many proponents of comprehensive reform hoped that existing class boundaries would also be broken down. They hoped to bring down a system in which particular