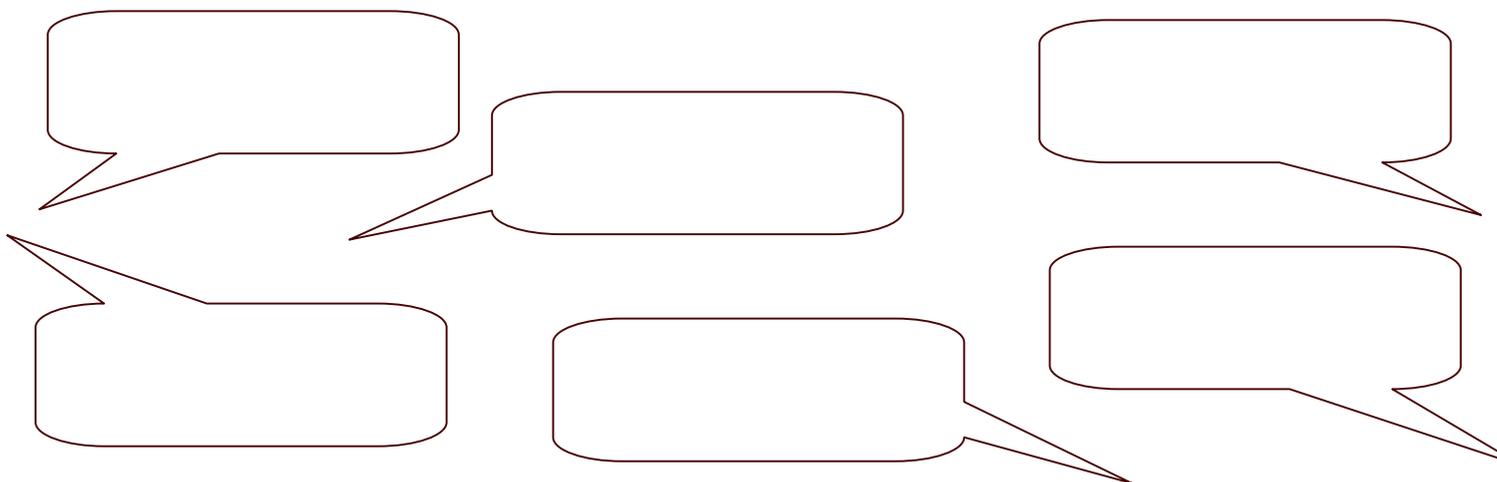


Prior to 1870, there was no state-funded education system...

Furious debate surrounded the issue of providing free education to the "lower orders"...



The pro-lobby won the argument and the 1870 Foster Act was produced...

Education Prior to 1870

The education system as we know it is a very recent development – the provision of education for all in general does not have a long history. Prior to 1870, only a tiny minority of the population received formal education – with the offspring of the rich and powerful (who could afford to pay fees) receiving education from **public and grammar schools**. Those children from the “lower orders” who were particularly lucky received a short and very basic education from schools provided by the **church** and by **charities**. The majority of people did without any formal education.

In the late 19th Century, however, this situation began to change as education was gradually extended to everyone. Britain had become an **industrial society** and there were fears that without a literate and numerate workforce Britain would fall behind its main rivals, Germany and the

USA. Many people agreed that basic standards of reading, writing and arithmetic were required to master the new techniques and practices of industrial expansion. Furthermore, it was thought that by educating the masses and showing them the essential justice of society and social order, “unhealthy” political influences - which could lead to unrest - would be reduced.

The move towards **state-supported universal education** was not, however, supported by everyone. Some people were worried that a literate poor might read “revolutionary” literature and acquire “dangerous” ideas. This could lead them to question their station in life and consequently cause social unrest. Other people were “sympathetic” to poor – arguing that it was unfair to educate them because they might expect a better life and be disappointed when these expectations were not realised.

Activity 1 Educating the ‘Lower Classes’

Item A No education

Giving education to the working classes would be bad for their morals and happiness. It would lead them to despise their lot in life instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other work to which their rank in society had destined them; instead of teaching them obedience it would make them difficult. It would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity.

Davies Giddy MP, *House of Commons*, 1807

Item B A little education

I do not think it is any part of the duty of the Government to prescribe what people should learn, except in the case of the poor, where time is so limited that we must fix upon a few elementary subjects to get anything done at all. The lower classes ought to be educated to discharge the duties cast upon them. They should also be educated that they may appreciate and defer to a higher cultivation when they meet it, and the higher classes ought to be educated in a very different manner, in order that they may exhibit to the lower classes that higher education to which, if it were shown to them, they would bow down and defer.

Robert Lowe *Primary and Classical Education* 1867, quoted in S.J.Curtis *History of Education in Great Britain*, 1963, p256

Item C The 1870 Education Act

Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends our industrial prosperity. Uneducated labourers are, for the most part, unskilled labourers, and if we leave our workfolk any longer unskilled they will become overmatched in the competition of the world.

W.E.Foster introducing his Education Bill, *Hansard*, 17.2.1870

Item D Drill



Boys doing arm exercises, 1906. Drills were the nearest many schoolchildren in the 19th and early 20th centuries got to physical education.

The 1870 Foster Act

The Foster Act, implemented in 1870 dramatically widened provision of education, and **elementary schools** were built to fill the gaps where there were no church or charity schools. It didn't aim to address the class basis of education, but instead to ensure that education was available to all children between the ages of 5 and 10. H.G. Wells, the writer, described the system as “*an Act to educate the lower classes for employment on lower class lines, and with specially trained, inferior teachers*”. Elementary schools aimed to cultivate personal qualities necessary for the “labouring classes”. There was an emphasis on punctuality, obedience and hard work and children were expected to leave at age 10 after receiving a cheap and sound elementary instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic. Any specialist knowledge would be learned at work rather than at school. James Fraser, Bishop of Manchester, speaking in 1958 about the working class child, illustrates this attitude:

“We must make up our minds to see the last of him, as far as day school is concerned, at ten or eleven ... and I venture to maintain that it is quite possible to teach a child soundly and thoroughly, in a way that he shall not forget it, all that is necessary for him to possess in the shape of intellectual attainment by the time that he is ten years old”

Meanwhile, the upper classes continued to be educated in fee-charging **public schools** until the age of 18 or 19, which emphasised the importance of developing social character and producing the Christian gentlemen who would go on to future leaders of society. The children of

the richer middle classes attended **grammar schools**, which essentially tried to copy the public schools and provided pupils with a wider academic curriculum than the elementary schools.

It is easy to discount the 1870 act because of its inequalities – however it is important to look at the positive side of the reform (and sociologists are incredibly guilty of neglecting the positive side!). It represents the first time that there was general acceptance that money raised through taxes should be used to provide education. It therefore began the idea of **state intervention** in education.

Reforms between 1870 - 1944

In the following years a number of policy changes extended the provision of state education. Firstly, in 1880 education up until the age of 10 was made a **legal requirement** – which was then raised to 12 in 1889. The curriculum in elementary schools was widened – although the idea that a only a limited education was suitable for the working classes persisted until the second world war.

The number of fee-charging grammar schools increased – as there was a shortage of people to fill the administrative jobs generated by the British Empire. In response to this, in 1902 the government began to put pressure on local authorities to provide secondary education in the form of grammar schools, which still charged fees with the availability of a limited number of scholarships.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. What was the major positive aspect of the 1870 Foster Act?
2. How did expectations of students in the three types of schools differ?
3. How did the subjects taught in the three schools differ?
4. How can this evidence be used as evidence that this education system simply reproduced existing class divisions?
5. Make a basic timeline of the reforms outlined in this lesson, including the more “minor” ones included at the end.