

# Schools, Class, Society

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

Since the war educationists have concentrated almost entirely on the problem of how to develop to the full the ability of each child—though ability has tended to be interpreted rather narrowly. They have chosen, on the whole, to ignore the way in which the educational structure reflects and moulds present society. The dominant features of society are the growing power of the working class and, accompanying this, the gradual dispersion of political and economic control throughout the community. The further development of an effective democracy will involve a great diffusion of power, and this in turn will necessitate the abolition of the leader-led mentality. The consequences of the persistent distinctions of class and leadership can be seen in the alarming gulf between the political and trade union leaders and their rank-and-file, between the political and administrative bureaucracy and the electorate: they are especially evident in those nationalised industries fighting against any kind of greater Parliamentary control. Democratic Socialists want a democracy in which the electorate has a far greater and more immediate participation in governing, and in which the distinctions between leaders and led are seen simply as those of function. How can these general aims be related to educational thinking? In this article I shall attempt to show that by their composition and organisation, both the public and the state school systems preserve an elite mentality and the consequent lack of communication between different social classes and groupings. I shall then suggest that the schools are one of the best places for experiment in the wider view of democracy.

## Prejudiced preference

In the eighteenth century Dean Swift complained that "the public Schools, by mingling the sons of noblemen with those of the vulgar, engaged the former in bad company"; but by the middle of the Nineteenth Century the Public Schools catered exclusively for the upper classes. Some, like the headmaster of Repton, attempted to reverse the growing class stratification of education but, like him, they had sadly to conclude "I never saw a man yet who would send his boy to a school in order to associate with those lower than himself. What had begun as a reflection of society ended by moulding it, and by the beginning of the Twentieth Century the public school system had become one of the most potent forces in society that preserved the existing class structure.

Twentieth century structural changes in society have modified but certainly not abolished the character and influence of the Public Schools. A recent survey of the upper middle-class revealed that all but 5% of the sample surveyed had sent their children to schools outside the state educational system. Another recent report—that on *Graduate Employment*—has shown that in commerce, finance, the law and the B.B.C. there is a greater annual intake of graduates with public

school backgrounds than of those from grammar schools. In the Civil Service 40% of the yearly graduate intake have received a public school education. These statistics do not reflect the greater numerical strength or ability of the Public Schools in the Universities. They hold 29% of University places—10% of them get first, 48% seconds and 43% other degrees. This compares with 14% Grammar School Firsts, 50% Seconds and 36% other degrees. It is thus impossible to resist the conclusion that their success is a result of the continuing prejudiced preference for Public School men, together with the high degree of self-recruitment among the upper middle-class.

## Pedagogy and power

Important levers of political, social and economic power are thus conferred on a class educated at schools where the pupils are drawn from an extremely narrow social background, and where outsiders are brought in only to be assimilated to the standards and values of the upper and upper-middle classes. In them the cult of leadership is inculcated at an early age through, e.g., the prefectorial system: the education itself preserves many outmoded features, contradicting with the main trends in contemporary British society. The anti-scientific bias in the Public School education still persists: only 38% read science or technology at the University, as opposed to 52% from the Grammar Schools (whose own record is not very impressive in this). The vocational training of Public School men to become members of the political and economic elite, the limitation of their environment to within the narrowest social confines (aided by the boarding school system) is continued even if they do go to University—58% of the university intake from the public schools go to Oxford or Cambridge.

Socialists sometimes claim that further changes in the social balance of power will make irrelevant the social consequences of the Public School education. They would claim that such changes combined with the establishment of competitive entry to the public schools would make it possible to permit and even to encourage the maintenance of the system. If they argue, the economic and political power of those professions dominated by the Public Schools (finance, civil service, law, Parliament, Public Relations) could be drastically reduced then it could no longer be said that the Public Schools exacerbated class tensions. This argument ignores the degree to which the continued existence of the public school system itself limits the possibilities of change in the class and social structure of British society. The character and organisation of the public school education will produce forces of inertia and positive resistance to radical social change. Encouraging and perpetuating class divisions it can only exacerbate social tensions. Even the enforcement of competitive entry to the Public Schools would be a most incomplete

reform if not accompanied by an insistence on the abolition of the traditional bias in the education *within* the schools. At most, the public schools would become an extension of the grammar schools. But is that what is needed?

### Streaming and society

The tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools was originally based upon the belief that for children of different types of ability there should be different types of education *and* different types of schools. It was claimed that this was the best way of ensuring that *every* child gained the best education possible—there was no notion of a hierarchy of skills and ability. Indeed the *Times Educational Supplement* stated in December, 1945, that:

"No greater mishap could overcome the new order in English education than that there should be established within its different grades of secondary schools with superior or inferior social status . . . different exit ramps leading to different and exclusive levels in adult society".

Yet that is what has in fact happened. Parity of esteem has become a myth. Parents of all classes want to see their children educated at grammar schools rather than secondary modern schools. A recent survey on *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* shows that 82-87% of the professional and business classes, 43-48% of unskilled workers and 48-53% of skilled workers preferred a grammar school education for their children. Frustration of this desire ranged from 27-49% of the professional and business classes to 79-84% of unskilled workers. Every year numerous letters to the local and national press bear witness to the intense disappointment of parents *and* children at failures in passing the ten-plus examination. A former education officer has written of a report; on a five-year-old child which read:

"Dorothy must work harder, if she is to succeed in the ten-plus examination".

One of the main reasons for the desire for a grammar school education is demonstrated by a report summarised in *Social Mobility in Britain*. The report showed that the children of all classes had very similar notions of social scale, in terms of occupational prestige, to their parents. In the grammar schools, children of all classes, and especially working-class children, expected to get jobs of greater prestige, often of much greater prestige than their parents. In Secondary Modern Schools far fewer had such expectations. Similarly, a large percentage of the parents of grammar school children expected that their children would gain jobs of greater prestige compared to a small percentage of the parents of Secondary Modern children.

With the increasing drive to produce more scientists and technologists it is clear that the prestige of the well-educated is going to increase still further. Even at the managerial and junior executive level a University education is becoming increasingly important. Parity of esteem has, in any case, already been well lost. Once it was lost the consequences of the doctrine of "different schools for different abilities" became socially as well as psychologically disastrous. In these circumstances the danger is very strong of our creating a new class

structure, based on certain types of ability, to replace that based on inheritance and direct economic power. At an early age the grammar school children soak in notions of their own superiority from their home and school environment. The middle class atmosphere which predominates at the grammar school, and the attempts to imitate the standards and methods of the public schools, create among many grammar school pupils the idea that they are to be the leaders of society.

The evidence for the middle class atmosphere and values of many grammar schools is brought out very clearly in a report conducted in the early Nineteen Fifties into four London County Grammar Schools. The report showed that even in the predominantly working class grammar school it was the middle-class boys who fitted in best with the general school atmosphere. Middle class boys showed a greater interest in all aspects of school life, especially in clubs and societies: 38-47% of them attending compared with 27-31% of working class boys. The survey showed, too, that differences in form placing (the middle class boys always came out on top); were *not* to be accounted for by differences in I.Q. The responsibility for the situation was placed both upon the attitudes of the teachers and the general policy of the grammar school as well as parents' attitudes and home background.

It is from this sort of school background that the scientists, technicians, economists and managers will continue to come. Their segregation from early childhood, the divorce of the academically able from other social groups, can only foster the idea of an oligarchy of ability.

In this section I have stressed the political and social consequences of forming such an elite. But of course the narrowness of outlook engendered by elites of every kind has a restricting effect upon the lives and personal development of its own members as well upon those outside. This effect was aptly summed up by the Edgeworths in the Eighteenth century, with reference to the public schools of the day:

"Small schools are apt to be filled with persons of nearly the same stations and out of the same neighbourhood. From these circumstances they tend to perpetuate uncouth, antiquated idioms and many of those obscure prejudices which cloud the intellect in the future business of life".

### Priorities of progress

It remains to outline briefly the type of reforms which a progressive educational policy should carry out. Since experiment is the most vital need, it would be disastrous if socialists were doctrinarian about one particular plan. At the moment the greatest need is for a formulation of lines along which experimentation can proceed.

First, there should be a decisive break with the organisation of British education around grammar and public schools. With their middle-class bias, their hindrance of the development of working class children, their retention of an outmoded bias towards the humanities, and their fostering—for example, by the prefectorial system—of elite attitudes, they can only be a fetter upon educational progress.

Second, the concept of "different schools for different abilities" must be rejected.

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Clearly these two aims could best be achieved through the development of some sort of comprehensive school system which would form the essential framework within which a more detailed approach could be worked out.

If they are to fulfil the aims sketched above the comprehensive schools must include certain features. There must be a notable increase in the degree of mixing between children of different ability and social groups until now the comprehensive schools have tended to preserve the rigidities of the old system by placing pupils in different classes according to differing abilities. The comprehensive schools might well follow the example of the attempts made in Sweden and Russia to discover the effect upon ability and social attitudes of teaching in one class children of differing abilities. If children are still to be streamed, there should be the maximum possible overlapping in the subjects available in each stream. The whole question of specialisation in schools—of which the lack of understanding between scientists and humanists is only the most common example—must be rigorously re-examined.

## Learning and levelling

All these things might be lines of educational experiment within the general framework of comprehensive school education. Yet there remains the ever present danger that streaming and size in the comprehensive school can produce new rigidities to replace the old division of grammar and secondary modern education. This problem, together with that of early-leaving and the lack of adequate sixth form teaching which still affects the comprehensive schools, might be solved on the lines suggested by Dr. Robin Pedley in *Comprehensive Education*. He suggests County Colleges, catering for all sixth form teaching within a fairly wide area. Since these colleges would be designed for both full-time and part-time further education, they might go some way to ending the present divorce between the young worker and the school-going adolescent.

A further essential reform would be the replacement of the prefectorial system by some type of school democracy. Whether or not the desirable type of school would go as far as that evolved in many "progressive schools", the comprehensive schools should certainly aim to have school and form committees working with the staff. Such a system already exists in the extremely successful comprehensive school in Walworth, South London, where according to every report, these committees have had a profound influence not only upon the pupils themselves but on the entire neighbourhood.

One probable objection to any such radical education reform as that suggested is that comprehensive education of any type involves a lowering of standards of educational proficiencies. The objection must be taken seriously—since as socialists we are above all else concerned with the fullest development of the abilities of each individual. But the objection can be met not by an abstract argument about equality, but simply and factually, by showing that the record of the present system is poor, and that the existing comprehensive schools do much better.

Professor Vernon\* in 1955 estimated that a quarter of those selected for grammar schools at the ten-plus examination later proved incapable of grammar school

work, while at least 5% of those relegated by the examination to the secondary modern school were capable of grammar school type work. The inadequacies of the examination are shown up not only by the harmful habit of streaming in junior schools—biasing the result at ridiculously early age—but also by the analysis of the exam results at comprehensive schools. For example, at Castle Rushen, of the 65 pupils who gained G.C.E. at ordinary level in the years 1951-3, 11 had originally been graded non-academic, and placed in a low form. In 1953 at this school one out of every three taking the G.C.E. exam gained a Certificate, one out of every four with four or more passes. And yet on average only one in five of those taking the ten-plus examination are admitted into grammar schools.

In some comprehensive schools there are cases of quite remarkable changes in ability between 11 and 16. Both the number of changes from one form to another and the ease of change are far higher *within* a comprehensive school than those between a secondary modern and a grammar school. In other words, between the ages of eleven and sixteen, comprehensive schools are succeeding where grammar and secondary modern schools are failing. There is levelling up rather than levelling down, again, only 9.8% of grammar school boys stay on into the sixth form, and (according to the national report on *Early Leaving* this is due in many cases to" the shortage of sixth form places. The percentage is 14.4% in the four comprehensive schools of the Isle of Man, and 19.8% at Holyhead Comprehensive School. It seems that it is in large part due to the variety of courses they offer that the Comprehensive Schools can attract the higher proportion of non-leavers. Holyhead Comprehensive School, for example, offers sixth form courses in pre-nursing, physiology, hygiene, sciences, English, Welsh, French, German, Latin, History, Geography, Art, Music, Maths., Engineering, Botany and Zoology.

The comprehensive schools, then, compare well with the grammar schools; but it has to be admitted that the comparison is less favourable when made with the well-established public schools. It is for this reason that alternative methods of sixth form education such as the County Colleges suggested by Dr. Robin Pedley should be tried. Until an adequate programme such as he suggested has been operated, Socialists should perhaps be cautious in their attacks on the direct-grant and public schools. Of course abolition must remain the general aim—but it cannot be suggested as an immediate possibility until satisfactory alternative methods of sixth form education have been introduced. Pedley estimates that it would take between five and ten years to develop such an alternative. These however are the lines upon which experiment must proceed, and it seems sadly mistaken of the Labour Party Conference in 1953 to have thrown out the suggestions of this character made by the Party Executive.

Enough is already known to show that a progressive educational programme entails no fall in academic standards. The case for reform could, then, be based upon ability alone. And yet this question can never be final. The development of educational ability must go together with the development of new social attitudes. Social, political and educational maturity cannot be separated.