

IN a stimulating article Mr. Armstrong has summed-up the evidence on the broad stratification of the English education system. He concluded by suggesting that freer experimenting in different forms of Comprehensive School Education was needed. We agree, but many of the social pressures that shape the system he described threaten the experiments he called for. Unless we analyse these forces carefully, we shall not be able to prepare the appropriate counter-measures.

The Comprehensive Schools so far established illustrate our point only too well, in their size, in organisation of classes and courses, in the aims set for pupils and staff. In particular every effort has been made to prevent their becoming *SOCIALIST* experiments, instead of cheap revisions of an inefficient system.

From the start the size of Comprehensive Schools has been kept high by Ministerial ruling. G. Tomlinson would not allow Middlesex to plan Comprehensive Schools of 800 pupils, and only last year Sir David Eccles decided that new Comprehensive Schools must (among other things) have over 1,500 pupils—thus providing an easy target for sniping campaigns by local Conservative Associations. Thus the majority of Comprehensive Schools take over 1,000 pupils, an unusually large content for English Schools. The natural tendency for the headmaster (chosen often with a bias for the "sound" administrator) is to see size as his main problem, rather than the comprehensiveness of the school.

The ostensible ground for objecting to large Comprehensive Schools lies in the following theory:

- i. Only one child in five is fitted for Grammar School education;
- ii. a Comprehensive School of 1,000 is the equivalent therefore of a Grammar School of 200;
- iii. Such Grammar Schools have uneconomic sixth forms . . . thus:
- iv. A Comprehensive School with fewer than 1,000 pupils is a poor investment.

The factual evidence to refute this argument is available in the official report on Early Leaving in Grammar Schools, and in Dr. Pedley's book: *Comprehensive Education: A New Approach*. In any case the argument does not obtain unless Comprehensive Schools are meant to be a tri-partite (Grammar-Technical-Modern System after the style of Plato) scheme in miniature. Surely the admission that under our present educational system only one child in five is suitable for academic study is a devastating criticism of either the system or the study?

Why is the need for drastic change not immediately accepted in the Comprehensive Schools? The sheer pressure of size with the attendant organisational problems is not the only thing which limits experiment. Pressures from the Ministry, the Educational press (largely Conservative), and a large proportion of

Schools, Class, Society

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influential Directors, Governors, Inspectors, teachers and parents make big changes very difficult. The educational climate is largely produced by people who have themselves enjoyed the fruits of the prevailing system. Interest or inertia help to prolong it.

The prevailing presupposition says that each child's intelligence and academic ability are inherently limited and fairly easily determinable. It is deduced from this that the present educational standards of the majority cannot be much improved, and that the talented one in five would suffer, by changes in organisation. The further fact that our society is graded into classes, clearly commends this theory to the mind of many an innocent layman, especially the Middle Class parent. As a result most of our Comprehensive Schools receive at eleven plus children who have been graded "Grammar", "Good Secondary Modern", "Backward", etc., and who often know it. Many of them have been graded before this: they have been placed in the "B" and "C" streams at seven plus or even earlier and some have been warned even then that their chances in the "scholarship" (as it is still commonly called) are slight. Since Primary Schools partly depend on support from active parents, who often wish to "push" their children, the ten plus results are important for their prestige: thus there is an almost irresistible pressure (made all the more noticeable by the occasional honourable exception) to allot the most experienced and skilled teachers to "A" streams.

To the great number of oversided classes are added the limitations on "B" and "C" children both directly, through the allocation of teachers, and indirectly, through the pervading attitude that they are "not suitable for Grammar School Education". What idealism and strength of purpose is needed to break this circle!

Similar pressures are normal in secondary schools also. When you receive a large group of eleven-year-olds, a few of whom can't write intelligently, whilst a few command a style almost as fluent and expressive as a well-educated adult, what are you to do? The vast majority of secondary school teachers are given a specialist training for Grammar School or Modern School work, and have no experience with unselected, and therefore probably very mixed classes. Most of them may not relish facing the new problems involved. Infant Teachers with classes of 40 and over are trained to handle unstreamed classes. Some Junior School teachers may have benefited from this fact, but we should be glad to hear of an Institute

of Education which had started a course on teaching unstreamed classes in Secondary Schools.

A main move towards a solution has been in the reduction in the number of streams to four, three or even two. Not all Comprehensive Schools have taken this course—Kidbrooke has 15 streams in the first year; while for the first six months only, Holyhead has none. Fundamentally, we shouldn't count the streams, but examine the attitudes built up around them—among staff as well as pupils. With streaming it is difficult to avoid an atmosphere of competition, of frustrated ambitions, the "writing off" of some stream as inevitable "hewers of wood," the allocation of new or "general" teachers to "bottom" streams, since specialists must be saved for the "grammar groups" and so on. Hence the famous lament in the staff room: "Only the bright boys seem capable of responding to me".

Fortunately the time comes when a boy is given another chance of breaking out of his mental straightjacket. Most Comprehensive Schools feel the pressure of Early Leaving, and probably their main endeavour at the moment is to combat this by providing a range of worthwhile courses with a vocational bias. These courses often cut across the usual form basis considerably. Providing the choice of course is left reasonably free there is a challenge to the maturer boys to overcome the limitations which they and their teachers have accepted as inevitable thus far. Pedley gives several outstanding cases of success.

Nevertheless, the proportion of such boys is kept low, and a major factor in depressing young hopefuls at this stage is the present Certificate examination. The fact that of Grammar School pupils only a limited proportion succeeds, by the applied standards, can be taken as a fair reflection on the type of paper (as also can the Grammar School system so loyally geared to the examination). A detailed analysis is badly needed, but any doubtful reader is recommended to obtain a paper and carefully to consider its cultural value, its relevance to any world, ours or the teenager's and what sort of knowledge (or lack of it) it actually tests. (We particularly suggest the London G.C.E. English Language paper of Autumn, 1956.)

Why not break away? Readers must recall the conditions under which Comprehensive Schools have come into existence. The earliest Comprehensive Schools generally started as Modern or Central Schools, often several grouped together, but still in their old buildings with inadequate facilities and poor ratios

of staff to pupils. A few exceptions have been built by expanding Grammar Schools—when the Minister would permit this.

Local pressures vary with each group, but several are common to all. The traditional Grammar School, with its record of Certificate results and University places, its well behaved children in neat uniforms, has the highest standard most parents—and teachers—have known. It is a route-way to school (nobility—often to success. Without a socialist attitude, no radical change is likely in most Comprehensive Schools. The conscious co-operation of the whole community is needed for the education of children, not tri-partite compition.

Parents' pressure for the abolition of the ten plus linked with teachers' efforts to reduce Primary classes to below 30 can give conditions for Comprehensive education from 5-11. Joint efforts now can ensure the training of sufficient additional teachers (for three years) to transform the secondary schools, and eventually to raise the school-leaving age and provide part-time colleges for 16-18. The

main sufferers (but not the only ones) are working-class children. The long-term sufferer is the whole of a divided society. It is the working-class parents who must be roused to fight for their children's interests as effectively as many middle-class parents. The £100,000 plus spent on research into selection techniques could be far better spent on methods of overcoming children's difficulties. Selection breeds more difficulties than it cures. We need more publicity about the success of experiments, and here this review can help. We need to remind everyone of the whole social context of today's situation; when our future standards will depend upon the training of sufficient technologists, technicians, scientists, and trainees more adaptable to different and changing demands than former generations. For this we shall need a social cohesion which has been largely absent so far. For this we shall need an education system which stresses not divisive factors as at the present, but one planned to advance co-operation, cohesion and comprehension—in other words: Comprehensive Education.