

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2004

A Comprehensive Curriculum for Comprehensive Schools

Lecturer: Richard Pring



Introduction

In the introduction to their book *Is Comprehensive Education Alive and Well or Struggling to Survive*, celebrating 30 years of comprehensive education, Caroline Benn and Clyde Chitty insist upon speaking

.... broadly in terms of comprehensive education, rather than narrowly in terms of comprehensive schools, to concentrate discussion on the array of forms comprehensive education has taken and the range of ages to which it applies. It is time to move on from sterile debate pegged to one or two past institutional embodiments of the comprehensive principle, which for one

reason or another have come to narrow the debate, even to caricature it.

Later, in a lecture given at the University of Oxford, entitled *Effective Comprehensive Education*, Caroline Benn stated

Originally I was assigned 'Effective Comprehensive Schools' as the title, but I asked if I could change it to 'Effective Comprehensive Education' taking the long view of the development of common education over several centuries. The reason was that, discussion in recent decades in Britain of the 'ideals' of comprehensive education has been stunted by being confined to a single institutional model at secondary stage rather than being seen as a principle applicable to a multiplicity of institutional forms, as well as to learning at all stages of life.

It may be argued that, were Caroline alive today, she would be delighted that this particular wish was being fulfilled. Perhaps we hear little about the comprehensive school – indeed, few such schools retain 'comprehensive' in their name; what was referred to not long ago as 'bog standard' is now a rare species. And in its place we have specialist schools, community schools, colleges of technology, academies, and so on. However, readers of government documents and political intentions might believe that the principle of comprehensive education lives on – through the recommended partnerships between otherwise diverse institutions, through the insistence upon greater social inclusion within the schools and colleges, and through the creation of equal, though different, pathways through the system into higher education or further training. A coherent system of education and training from 14 to 19, the aim of this government, would belie the criticism of those who believe that comprehensive education is in terminal decline.

The basis of this claim to the maintenance, indeed furtherance, of comprehensive principles is explored in this paper.

First, I shall remind you of what those basic principles were or are.

Second, I shall examine how they might be thought to be alive and well in present policy and developments.

Third, I shall point to some awkward facts which would, I think, have made Caroline apprehensive.

Fourth, I shall indicate what we must increasingly and forcefully argue for if what Caroline Benn believed in is to be preserved and enhanced.

Comprehensive principles

This territory has been so frequently and thoroughly analysed by much more able people than myself, that I shall be brief, indicating rather than arguing what have been and should remain the guiding principle in a comprehensive education of the kind that Caroline Benn believed in.

The main principle, so well articulated in his book *Comprehensive Values* by Pat Daunt nearly 30 years ago, concerned 'equality of respect'. That meant that, whatever the differences between young people in social class, ethnicity, aptitude or intelligence, each should be treated as of equal importance, and anything which gets in the way of that respect should, as far as possible, be eliminated. As was so well demonstrated by Olive Banks at the time in her book *Parity and Esteem in Secondary Education*, such equality of respect was not possible where, at an early age, young people were assigned to different kinds of institutions which themselves did not attract equality of respect. Inequality of respect for different institutions created inequality of respect for the different individuals within them. It was deemed important that there should be a common school.

The second principle followed from this, though it was by no means universally recognised even within comprehensive schools. That principle was described by Professor A. H. Halsey in his 1978 Reith lectures, namely, the 'social principle of fraternity'. Halsey was in part addressing the problem of growing social conflict, and the need, in consequence, to nurture the recognition of the interdependence of each one on the other – whether in the small local social groups we inhabit or in the much wider national society. Society requires mutual respect and co-operation. This in turn can be achieved through the face to face relationships through which the qualities and the needs of those from very different backgrounds can be recognised. And such recognition and respect can be enhanced through shared experience and endeavours, not through isolation, separate institutions and quite different expectations and experiences. Hence, in his sixth lecture, Halsey argues

We have still to provide a common experience of citizenship in childhood and old age, in work and play, and in health and sickness. We have still in short to develop a common culture to replace the divided culture of class and status.

In these lectures we were reminded of the argument in Tawney's 1931 book, *Equality*, where he states

What a community requires, as the word itself suggests, is a common culture, because, without it, it is not a community at all.

The third principle, following closely from that above, lies in the aim and value of education for all young people, irrespective of ability, attainment and destiny. Obvious, you might say. But not really. We have inherited an idea of education which assumes that only a few are really capable of being educated, of gaining (from an extension of formal schooling) that development of the mind, that 'intellectual excellence' which is associated with our idea of an 'educated person'. Hence, the arguments and the struggles when the compulsory school leaving age was raised in the 1970s. It was argued vigorously then that 'education' was for some and vocational training should be provided for the rest – or direct transition to unskilled work.

However, other voices prevailed. 'Education' refers to the development of the mind in terms of improved understanding, emancipation from the ignorance which handicaps so many people, acquisition of the knowledge and skills which give independence of thought and living, formation of ideals and purpose which keep one going when life gets tough. And, so the advocates of comprehensive education argued, all young people were capable of such development and emancipation, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

These, then were the principles which inspired people to fight for a system of education which was truly comprehensive, which did not make distinctions in terms of provision, resources and opportunities for reasons which could not be justified except in terms of relevant differences. The general principle of distributive justice was succinctly put at the time by Stanley Benn and Richard Peters:

What we really demand, when we say that all men are equal, is that none shall be held to have a claim to better treatment than another, in advance of good grounds being produced

If distinctions are to be made between young people in terms of educational experience and opportunity, or in terms of the distribution of resources, then the onus of proof lies on the shoulders of those who wish to make the distinctions.

Government policy

What might have cheered Caroline Benn is the apparent recognition of these principles by the present government. Education for all young people is firmly on the agenda. The intention is that all young people should be in some form of education and training up to the age of 18. Social inclusion is one of the three major and interacting aims of the government's educational policy – the other being higher standards (particularly of literacy and numeracy) and economic relevance. Many more are thought to be capable of higher education than was deemed possible before the comprehensive schools were first established (a target of 50% instead of the 7% in the late 1960s).

Perhaps comprehensive schools rarely get a mention. But partnerships between institutions (thereby enabling greater flexibility in progression through the system and more equitable use of resources) is an essential part of the government's 'skills revolution' in its declared aim to 'realise our potential' (DfES, 2003). The informal partnerships which the Chitty and Benn study discovered, but without formal recognition or approval, would now seem to be actively promoted. And the funding arrangements from the newly reformed Learning and Skills Council would seem to be encouraging that, preceded by the Strategic Area Reviews conducted in each locality. How, the Local Learning and Skills Councils are asking, can we pull all institutions together (including Private Learning Providers and employers) to ensure a truly comprehensive system of post 16 education and training which will meet the needs and aspirations of all young people?

Furthermore, such an aspiration is seen to be achieved by giving equal status to the more vocational routes through the system into further training, employment or higher education. The report of the Tomlinson working party has produced a blue print for a unified framework of qualifications which would give equal value in the award of a diploma to both academic and vocational qualifications – or indeed to a mixture of the two. Furthermore, that diploma would be obtainable at different levels, thereby respecting the different sorts and levels of achievements, rather than seeing lower level and vocational ones as failures.

Surely, then the government is extending the principles of comprehensive education to and beyond the age of 18. Robin Pedley, whose inaugural lecture at the University of Exeter in 1970 on the 'comprehensive university' was greeted with derision, has finally been vindicated: a system which, through partnerships, provides flexible routes through to 18 with access for all to whatever resources are needed, a common experience in those institutions, equality of respect for what has been achieved – at different levels and in different academic and vocational routes, openness to higher education for those who want it, and financial support through educational maintenance grants for the financially disadvantaged

Difficulties

We are presently conducting a review of education and training 14-19 for the Nuffield Foundation. After one year we have produced a report which acknowledges what the government is endeavouring to do and what it has achieved. More young people are participating in education and training, and more are studying at Level 3. More are gaining access to higher education. The curriculum has become more flexible with a view to encouraging and enabling more young people to progress into skilled work and higher education

However, there are two (maybe more) major difficulties with the government agenda.

The first lies in the commitment to partnership – the shift, if you like, although it is never said in these terms, from a commitment to the comprehensive *school* to a commitment to a comprehensive *system*.

Such a system, as I have argued, would require the sort of partnership between institutions which would enable all young people equally to benefit from the resources and the strengths which they have in common. It would enable each and every young person to select and to follow the course which he or she wanted, deserved and found appropriate. It would require equity in funding. It would replace autonomy and competition with shared responsibility and co-operation.

But at the very time that such a partnership is being proclaimed, so the fragmentation of the educational system is proceeding apace. At the same time as the Learning and Skills Council's Strategic Area Reviews are seeking to provide a comprehensive review of institutional provision with a view to ensuring a fair allocation of resources, a sharing of those resources and a greater co-operation across schools, colleges, sixth-form provision and private learning providers - at that very time, the government has embarked upon the development of academies (only a short time ago called 'city academies'), which, though publicly funded, have the privilege of private and independent institutions. They lie outside the remit of the Strategic Area Reviews. They operate under quite different funding arrangements and regulations. Not only need they not co-operate, they are in many cases in direct competition with schools which are much less generously funded. Private sponsors, with educational views which would be given short shrift within the public sector, are able to have public capital grants of up to £30million for the donation of £2million, from which money is sometime returned to the donor as reward for consultancy.

But this quite scandalous development is but one end of the diverse and inequitable system which the government has created and is furthering. The mosaic of institutions which deliver education include grammar, secondary modern and comprehensive schools, schools with and schools without sixth forms, sixth form colleges, tertiary colleges and colleges of further education, specialist schools of every hue and colour (has there really been discovered a genetic pool of lacrosse players in Middle Wallop, requiring some sort of specialist treatment?), beacon schools and training schools. Just as co-operation is reached, so schools are encouraged to develop sixth forms, thereby giving them a market advantage over the neighbouring 11 to 16 schools or the college of further education. And these different institutions receive differential funding. The Association of Colleges claims that colleges of further education receive 10% less funding than schools for the same work.

Instead of co-operation and partnership, what is being encouraged is fragmentation and competition – and competition on an unequal playing field. What our Review has revealed is the hidden selection which is taking place, as students move from pre- to post-16. Not all types of courses are available in each institution, and hence the selection of students by some institutions denies access to courses to other students – cut off from certain pathways. In 2002 sixth form colleges (usually, the transformed local grammar school) catered for fewer than 7% of those with fewer than five GCSEs at Grade C or above. Over 70% of those studying at Level 2 or below went to colleges of further education, whereas only 22% remained in the school sixth forms. Ethnic minority 16-19 year olds mainly studied in colleges of further education. It is clear that many students are forced into institutions – and into courses - of second choice.

Hence, despite the admirable promotion of education and training and despite the increased participation and retention, the system remains fragmented, competitive, selective, unequally resourced – not the comprehensive system of partnership and co-operation which Caroline Benn so ardently fought for.

The second major difficulty with the government agenda – and one ignored, if not exacerbated, by the Tomlinson Report – lies in the failure to listen to the voices of Tawney and Halsey already quoted. They talked of the provision of 'a common experience of citizenship', and of a 'common culture to replace the divided culture of class and status'. Not only are we still dividing young people into an increasingly selective system (selective both *formally approved* in academies, specialist schools and grammar schools, whose recruitment has increase by about a third under the present government, and *informally occurring* in the way in which courses are distributed across different institutions). But also we are retaining the division of young people through the impoverished language of the academic and vocational divide.

I find it increasingly difficult to understand these terms, and yet they characterise different pathways for different sorts of young people. Is the graduate in English at Oxford University, who will subsequently be paid handsomely as a journalist for writing elegantly about any subject he or she knows nothing about, academically educated or vocationally trained? The so called academic pathway has the sort of esteem which cannot be wished away by the wave of a magic wand. Parity of esteem does not come from the government's declaring it so. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary has one definition of the academic as 'abstract, unpractical, cold, merely logical'. 'Vocational' on the other hand refers to 'fitness for a career or an occupation'.

Such a distinction does not embrace the sum of all that is worth learning. But, under the influence of such a dichotomy – between the cerebral, abstract, ideas-based 'academic' and the practical, concrete, skills-based vocational – so much of importance is omitted, especially those learning experiences which enable young people to explore what it means to be human, how they became so and how they might be more so.

It is, of course, the function of the arts and of the humanities to explore those issues of profound human importance. But it is precisely the arts and the humanities which are being sidelined in the pursuit of academic and vocational pathways. History, geography, drama, painting and poetry appear to have little immediate relevance to economic advancement, and hence are 'disapplied' from the National Curriculum after the age of 14 for those for whom work based learning is thought appropriate. And yet they provide the resources upon which the issues which matter most to young people are systematically explored..

The curriculum

The title of this lecture refers to a comprehensive curriculum. By that I do not mean that, in the comprehensive system which Caroline Benn referred to, everyone should be studying the same things. Of course, there is a need for differentiation according to interest, aspiration, ability and attainment. And that no doubt would be reflected in the different routes through the system and its distinctive institutions. But, whatever the differences, there remain common areas of interest and concern. And those common interests and concerns are the very stuff of literature, the humanities and the arts – the very curriculum areas which have been disapplied (an ugly word much loved by Ministers but not yet in the Oxford English Dictionary) after the age of 14 for those for whom learning should be more work based.

When the school leaving age was raised in the early 1970s, much anxiety was expressed about those young people who, not having academic aspirations, would be 'disengaged', a source of disruption and discontent. Vocational training was seen to be the solution, a practical preparation for the world of work.

But there were some who believed that the richness of our culture - in poetry, drama, the arts, in particular – provided the resources upon which they could explore those matters which concerned us all, irrespective of social or religious or ethnic background. The problems which worried young people, and which are no doubt the topics of conversation and argument behind the bicycle sheds, are the themes of great art and literature: the use and misuse of authority, relations between the sexes, racism, the prevalence and consequences of poverty, the justification for going to war, the effects of ambition, the role and the nature of the family. As was stated in the second Working Paper of the Schools Council, the curriculum is the place where the teacher might share his or her humanity with the students – but to do so through the best that has been thought and said by others. Those who have witnessed good teachers of drama will know how, across the academic and vocational divide, that common experience, reflected in a common culture, can provide the unifying force within an otherwise divided society.

Jerome Bruner (1966) said that the three questions which should shape the learning experience of young people are (i) 'what is it that makes us human?', (ii) 'how did we become so?' and (iii) 'how might we become more so?' Answers to such questions require the exploration of both science and the

arts, literature and history, the social sciences and anthropology, linguistics and history, philosophy and theology. That exploration requires discussion and argument, though disciplined by the evidence to be found in these different literatures and studies.

To enter the difficult and essentially controversial territory of defining what it means to be human, to explore with young people within the context of their own lives those issues of great personal and social concern, to respect and to find a place for their voices and their experience, and thus to share (in the words of Derek Morrell) one's humanity with the young people, are surely the most important educational tasks that we have. Such exploration transcends the divide between the academic and the vocational; it enriches a language too often reduced to that of 'skill enhancement'; it challenges the limitations and narrowness of the measurable targets set by educational planners; it reaches deep into the very souls of the young people themselves. And such is the very purpose of the arts and the humanities at their best.

It is my intention that the Review we are presently conducting through the Nuffield Foundation will raise again the role of the humanities and the arts, diminished as they have become in the current attempt to provide different pathways for different young people, so that we can try once again to provide what Tawney referred to as a common culture at the heart of a comprehensive education – a theme which has remained constant in this Institute through the work and publications of Professor Denis Lawton.

Those who believe that this is mere pipe dream, a fantasy disconnected from any sense of the real world that so many young people inhabit, should think back to a time when imaginative curriculum developments did make concrete and practical an experience of the humanities which was truly comprehensive. They should think, too, of the countless examples of drama teachers and teachers of literature who have inspired and engaged young people across the various boundaries which otherwise divide them. But above all they should be aware of the urgency of this task in a world so torn with divisions of many kinds.

I beg the forgiveness of those who have heard me finish other talks with this particular quote. But I refer to a visit to an American High School some 20 years ago and listening to the Principal of this school reading the poetry she had written as a girl of 11, separated from her mother and her twin sister, never to be seen again. It was a large school, with therefore a considerable turn-over of teachers each year. Each year, therefore, she wrote this letter to the new teachers.

Dear Teacher

I am the survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers;

Children poisoned by educated physician;

Infants killed by trained nurses;

Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your students become human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans.

Reading writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

The comprehensive ideal must be centrally about making our children more human, and such an ideal cannot be captured in the language of pathways, academic or vocational. It cannot be reduced to skill acquisition. It requires a profound respect for the voices of the young people themselves, howsoever at times they may appear objectionable, and making a place for those voices to be articulated. It requires a

concentration upon the social and personal skills to engage in controversial matters which affect them profoundly and which divide society - whilst respecting persons with opposite but sincerely held views. It requires, too, exposure to the words and thoughts of others, of previous generations, who have explored such issues through literature, history, drama, the social sciences and religion.

But to make sure this is a common experience there is a need to examine carefully and critically the way in which the system as a whole, far from providing that common experience, is becoming increasingly divided and selective – re-enforced by the false dichotomy between the academic and the vocational.

In the chair: Professor Geoff Whitty

Editorial note

This lecture was originally accompanied by an image: *Impressions of Professor Pring* by Jackie Lukes. This image could not be found on the old SEA website. Does anyone have a copy?