

Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2012

The Comprehensive Ideal in the 21st Century

Lecturer: Stephen Twigg



Introduction

Thank you Melissa, and thank you to you and the Socialist Education Association for hosting tonight's event and for inviting me to give the Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture. It's fantastic to see so many Benns in one room. Particularly Tony of course, but also Hilary and Melissa.

It is wonderful that Melissa has continued the work of her mother as a fierce advocate for a more equal education system.

Let me also say something today about Tony Benn. I became interested in the Labour Party as a teenager. For my 14th birthday in 1980, I asked my parents for Tony Benn's "Arguments for Socialism". Shortly afterwards, I decided that I wanted to visit Parliament for the first time. Our local MP was a Conservative so I was reluctant to contact him. Instead I telephoned Tony Benn's Westminster office. To my surprise and delight, Tony himself answered the phone and he kindly sent two gallery tickets. So a couple of weeks later I took the afternoon off school and went with my Dad to watch Prime Minister's Questions. A year later, I joined the Labour Party. Tony Benn's passion and clarity were a big influence on me at that time.

Having been born in Cincinnati, Caroline Benn saw the British education system with an outsider's eyes – despairing at the divisiveness and elitism of our system. Her determination to change it was an intellectual struggle – as a writer and an academic, but also a practical one – as a governor of Holland Park Comprehensive.

You can't tell Caroline's story without also telling the story of Holland Park. The school became the epitome of a new wave in education – as one former teacher put it, "on the wilder shores of pedagogy, but always brave, thrilling and fiercely intellectual."

Depending on your pre-conceptions, it was either the Eton of comprehensives, or a sickening den of drugs, deviance, and left wing dogma.

Caroline and Tony decided to take all four of their children out of private schools and move them to Holland Park. I'm told that even now Tony recalls the consternation there was amongst friends and family at this dangerous sacrifice of his offspring.

Clearly one only needs to look at what has become of them – a published author, a Director at the Society of Biology, the head of IT at Crisis, and a former Cabinet Minister to see the strain of underachievement that still haunts the family.

My own commitment to the Comprehensive Ideal comes from my upbringing – and in particular my Mum's influence. She was an only child in a working class family in the East End of London. She was bright but failed the 11-plus. However, she was able to retake it and passed, gaining a place at Dame Alice Owen's Grammar School. Despite doing well at school, her parents expected her to leave at 15 and get a job.

This scarred her for life and shaped how she brought up my sister and me. We were always encouraged to aim high and go on to university and she was determined that we both attend our local comprehensive school, Southgate. I owe a lot to my Mum and Dad but I am also indebted to some fantastic teachers at Southgate School.

The Comprehensive Ideal in the 21st Century

Caroline Benn's seminal book on comprehensive education, 'Halfway There' was published in the early stages of a Conservative Government in June 1970, when Margaret Thatcher was Education Secretary.

The parallels with today are striking. She writes that "Policies replace one another with what seems like unseemly haste. For the ordinary student, just keeping up with events and decisions becomes an insuperable task."

She writes about the establishment of a new wave of schools. "As a result, fundamental new features on the educational landscape have come into being, developments that will profoundly affect the structure and practice of education at all levels."

Then it was 2,000 comprehensive schools, today it is 2,000 academies.

Whether it is her discussion of how to deal with the two-tier CSEs and O-Levels system, or thoughts on how best to develop 14 to 19 provision in comprehensive schools, you see how many of the debates remain fundamentally unchanged.

Despite all the progress that has been made in the four decades since the book was published, it stills feels like we are only "Halfway There". We must renew our vision and challenge orthodoxies to establish a One Nation Education system.

Caroline Benn's central thesis was that the economic and technological successes of the most advanced industrial nations – at the time, the United States of America and the USSR, were built on the foundations of a non-selective, unified education system.

Since then, countries such as Finland and Japan have reformed their education systems to reduce selection and narrow educational divides, and have reaped the economic benefits.

Today, I want to go back to the first principles of comprehensive education. What are the defining features of a comprehensive system?

The first is that it must provide an all abilities education service. We need to think carefully about what that means. It means schools being able to attract the brightest children, as well as those who are currently struggling. Too often, some schools which were badged as comprehensive didn't fulfil that ambition.

Second, they must be non-selective. But what is a simple principle can prove immensely complex in reality. There are some schools which practice covert selection, through the use of opaque means. I want to have confidence that if a school acts as its own admissions authority then it should follow both the letter and the spirit of the admissions code.

And if there is a case to strengthen the admissions code, we will look at that, through our planned Office for Educational Improvement.

There is then the wider question of selection by post code and by house price. The educational inequalities that exist within our country are being exacerbated by the ability of wealthier parents – and who can blame them – to move into a catchment area of a school that is rated as outstanding. It is why the original focus of Labour's academies programme, on areas of economic and educational disadvantage was so important. But we need to go further today to address educational inequalities.

Third, no school should be an island. Rather than focusing simply on competition, collaboration should be promoted within the school system. Strong schools should work with weaker schools to raise performance for all. To ensure that no school is left behind.

Too often our discussions focus on who should be the provider of education. More important is to focus on the principles which underpin education.

The values which established comprehensive education in 1944 remain the same. But it doesn't mean that the policies should do. So I believe you can have a range of providers that run comprehensive schools.

Comprehensive education shouldn't be simply a byword for municipal education. Today, hardly anyone thinks that local authorities should directly run schools, though there is still an important role for local government in education.

I have recently completed a six month consultation on the future role of local government and other 'middle tiers' in education. It is clear that local government has several indispensable roles to play:

- as a voice for local communities and parents
- as a planner and commissioner of school places
- as the provider of schools especially in the primary sector

Two present day crises illustrate the continuing relevance of local authorities in education – the GCSE English fiasco, and the primary schools places crisis. In both cases, local authorities have taken the lead. Let me set out three examples of very different ways in which the comprehensive ideal is being realised in a modern context.

The Gipsy Hill Federation in South London. Five primary schools, which are not academies, have formed a federation so schools that are currently stronger, such as Kingswood Primary, are supporting weaker schools, such as Fenstanton Primary. All under the inspiring leadership of Craig Tunstall. These schools are breaking the link between disadvantage and underachievement.

Paddington Academy is a modern day comprehensive. Run by United Learning, a non-profit education organisation, it has a mixed ability intake, is part of a chain which supports other schools – and has excellent results. It raises aspiration in one of the poorest areas of the country. Five years ago, only a quarter of pupils got 5 good GCSEs. Now, three quarters do and they sent their first pupil to Cambridge.

And even the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Blackburn. A school which was established when Henry VIII was on the throne, and used to charge fees of £10,000. Because of dire economic circumstances, they plan to convert to become a Free School. Provided that standards are high, there is no entrance exam, no fees and the admissions process is genuinely fair to pupils of all ability, then that is something we should celebrate.

These schools show how you can achieve the comprehensive ideal in a way that reflects the 21st century. Outstanding achievement for pupils from all backgrounds, but no one size fits all model of delivery. They are part of the rich fabric of One Nation Education.

Today, even Holland Park looks a little different. While it retains its comprehensive ethos, it is now an academy, in a brand new, if expensive building. It also has incredibly impressive results – this year 90% of students got 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths.

We made great strides in Government. In particular to raise levels of literacy and numeracy at all ages, and to provide more children with the best start in life by investing in Sure Start and improving primary schools.

What I am most proud of is the way in which the gap between the richest and poorest pupils was narrowed by a Labour Government. Analysis carried out by the Financial Times showed that there was a “sustained improvement in the results of children from the poorest neighbourhoods”.

Between 2006 and 2010, the gap closed by one sixth of a grade – and these were in subjects which now form part of the E Bacc – sciences, modern languages, maths, English, history and geography.

So let’s end the total myth that the improvements over the last decade were because of grade inflation, or so-called ‘mickey mouse’ subjects. Pupils, particularly from poorer backgrounds did better – because of school reform, more and better teachers and a focus on the early years.

The Arc of Underachievement

However, there are still too many pupils in too many schools who don’t achieve their full potential.

There remains a shocking divide in attainment between students from richer and poorer backgrounds. Pupils attending schools with the fewest number of children on free school meals are more than twice as likely to get an A*-C grade in English and Maths than those attending a school with the highest numbers of children on free school meals.

There is also a divide between the success of London in the last decade, and the rest of the country. Thanks in part to Labour’s London Challenge, a government programme of targeted intervention and support, in 2011 London pupils did better in five GCSEs including maths and English than pupils from any other region.

And while we celebrate London’s startling turnaround, we need to understand why other parts of the country have not made such progress.

I want to talk about a new divide today. While the achievement gap between poorer and wealthier children narrowed under a Labour Government, I want to talk about an Arc of Underachievement which is blighting the life chances of thousands of children and young people.

This Arc of Underachievement runs through many of our seaside towns and coastal cities. In places such as Clacton, Torbay and Morecambe, there are too many schools which are not allowing pupils to make the most of their potential.

Many schools in these communities are below the national average for GCSE results.

While overall results improved between 2006 and 2010, coastal areas fared less well. If you take Cornwall – the probability that a poor child will have GCSE results in the bottom quarter nationally increased by 8% between 2006 and 2010. Whereas in Southwark, the probability decreased by 7%. In North East Lincolnshire, the probability increased by 7%, whereas in Darlington it fell by 10%.

There is also an Arc of Underachievement that includes a number of Northern towns and cities in England – including some schools in places such as Hull, Blackpool and Knowsley. In these areas, fewer than half of all pupils get 5 good GCSE grades A* to C, including English and Maths, and they do not make the progress you would expect of pupils.

However, there are also some beacons of excellence such as Manchester and Bury, and we need to learn from their success.

I am well aware that by highlighting these areas, it will produce a defensive response from some in those schools and those communities.

I am not suggesting for one minute that every school in each of these regions is poor. But the evidence is overwhelming that children do systematically worse in these areas than in other parts of England. And I am grateful to both Ofsted and the Financial Times for their work in highlighting these inequalities.

As those who believe in social justice and equality of opportunity, we must address this problem honestly, and without fear. To do anything else would be to allow a catastrophe of neglect.

The causes of this Arc of Underachievement are complex. And the solutions are not simple, despite what Michael Gove might claim.

Poverty plays a role of course. Many areas in the Arc of Underachievement, contain schools with a higher than average proportion of pupils on free school meals. But that is only part of it. We must never accept the attitude which says ‘you don’t know what we are working with – you can’t turn coal into diamond.’ If that was the case, why is that schools in places like Hackney and Jarrow achieve impressive results?

In many areas, it is white working class children who are being held back. In the most recent set of GCSE data, white pupils on free schools meals were the worst performers. Fewer than 30% of white pupils on free school meals got 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths. That compares to 44% of Black pupils, nearly half of Asian pupils, and 74% of Chinese pupils on free school meals.

There are several factors which create a poverty of aspiration which is passed between generations. Those on the right, and the far right would like to exploit the failure of white working class pupils and link this to multiculturalism and immigration. In fact, as London’s performance suggests, many immigrant communities tend to have high aspirations, which can raise achievement amongst non-immigrant communities. Often, it is in areas which are more mono-cultural that ambition can be held back.

Many of these areas have been suffering long-term decline. Northern towns and cities have witnessed the collapse of traditional extractive industries and manufacturing, while seaside resorts have suffered a decline in tourism with the appeal of cheap flights to sunnier climes.

The other major element is isolation. Experienced teachers and bright graduates are less likely to move to these areas, partly because they don’t know about them, or they fear a long journey to visit friends and family. The remoteness of a place like Hunstanton in Norfolk means they have struggled to recruit science teachers. While there are many excellent teachers and head teachers, areas of Cumbria, including schools in Barrow, Ulverston and Workington have struggled to attract enough high quality teachers and head teachers.

The Government’s approach is one dimensional

The answer from the Government to underperforming schools is one dimensional. Whatever the question – the answer is academies, as the Prime Minister’s announcement yesterday showed.

Now, academies have achieved great things, and will continue to do so. I have been vocal in my support for schools like the City Academy Norwich, indeed I invited the head teacher, Dave Brunton to speak at Labour party conference.

But we have to accept that changing a school's governing structure is not a guarantee of success. The worst performing school in England, St Adhelm's in Poole, is an academy. Only 3% got 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths last year. While Paddington Academy is one of the best schools in Westminster, the Lambeth Academy is one of the least successful in Lambeth.

Academies can and do work, and we should not oppose them on ideological grounds. But neither should we dogmatically prescribe them. The most important factor in a school's success is the quality of the head teacher. If a change of governance can attract a better head and teachers, then we should examine that, but it is not the only solution.

We should also celebrate those schools that achieve great things without becoming academies.

Last month, I visited Highlands Comprehensive School in Enfield. It is a school close to my heart as I campaigned to have it created when I was the local MP in Enfield Southgate, and it was opened by Tony Blair in 2001. Rated outstanding by Ofsted, their results are well above the national average, with nearly three quarters of students getting 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths last year. Under the brilliant leadership of Bruce Goddard, the school is working closely with local primary schools to improve their results as well. Highlands considered academy status, but decided not to go ahead.

The Kingswood and Elm Wood Primary Schools, which I mentioned earlier as part of the Gipsy Hill Federation are both outstanding.

They chose to become part of a federation. It is worth quoting from a letter from Ofsted

“The quality of leadership and management across the federation is outstanding. Rigorous, imaginative recruitment procedures ensure that you appoint staff of a high calibre. You invest quality time in their professional development and hold them accountable for improved outcomes for pupils. Consequently, they are effective leaders of learning in their own right; this gives the federation a powerful capacity to sustain improvement at a swift pace.”

By working with the other primaries in their neighbourhood, the Gipsy Hill Federation is ensuring that no school is left behind.

The quality of teaching is critical. A poor pupil, being taught by a poor teacher faces the equivalent of being left a year behind, according to research by Professor Dylan Wiliam. It makes 70 to 80% of the difference, while school type accounts for only 7%. That is why I am so concerned that the numbers of teachers dropped by 10,000 in Michael Gove's first year in office. We need more and better teachers.

Improving teaching can mean tough decisions. In one of the schools in the Gipsy Hill Federation, the new head found that the staff were simply not up to scratch. So 70% of them were replaced by better teachers. That is a stark example, but we must be prepared to support head teachers who want to bring in new teachers, and improve the training and professional development of existing teachers.

I have talked about a New Deal for Teachers.

As part of that, a Labour Government would double the number of Teach First graduates from 1,000 teachers a year to 2,000 – the Government has only committed to expand the scheme to 1,500.

Because Teach First place graduates in schools, it helps areas like remote coastal towns which find it harder to recruit. I'm aware of one Teach First graduate who came from Watford and had never heard of Grimsby before, but is now a successful teacher there.

We need to incentivise teachers to go to communities in the North and in coastal areas. Disastrously, the Government is examining regional pay which would reduce salaries in these areas. Instead, I want to look at a refund on teacher tuition fees if you commit to teach in a challenging school in a less well off community for a minimum of two years.

All this must sit alongside a commitment to improve the quality of professional development in schools. So Labour is calling for the establishment of an equivalent of the medical Royal Colleges for the teaching

profession. We would set up a National College for Teaching Excellence to share best practice, and raise the quality of on-the-job development.

No School Left Behind

I talked before about the London Challenge. Schools in London, which were once below average, are now amongst the best in the country.

The lessons are clear. Yes, creating new academies was part of the answer – but we did so in partnership with local authorities to sustain improvement.

But the most important elements were clear and focused leadership, and schools collaborating with each other. As the Ofsted analysis of London Challenge showed, the key ingredients were:

- clear leadership from London Challenge advisers and Ofsted;
- a ‘System leaders’ model – with successful headteachers mentoring other heads;
- support for school improvement from local authorities, external consultants and – critically – teaching schools;
- a ‘Keys to success’ programme – robust systems to track pupils progress and identify effective interventions at an early stage;
- and building a sense of pride in being part of a city wide education service.

I believe these principles can be applied to raise attainment in the Arc of Underachievement.

Learning from successful school improvements in London and in Manchester I am today calling for a series of regional “school challenges” which target some Northern areas and coastal communities.

What is needed is a relentless drive on school improvement which is focussed on clear leadership, early intervention and effective collaboration. To ensure that no school is left behind.

The evidence shows this can work. As well as London, the Greater Manchester Challenge, led by Professor Mel Ainscow between 2007 and 2011 led to sustained improvement, particularly in areas like Bury and Trafford, where standards had previously been poor. In 2011, secondary schools in Greater Manchester improved faster than schools nationally, with the schools serving the most disadvantaged communities making three times more improvement than schools across the country.

Many of the factors which worked in London were also successful – evidence based collaboration was critical. As an evaluation of the scheme says, “schools need to base their relationships on evidence about each other’s strengths and weaknesses, so that they can challenge each other to improve.”

Rather than the Government’s plan which only works for some pupils and some schools, we need a system that works for all pupils and all schools – so that no school is left behind. It is a key plank of One Nation Education.

The essence of this is strong schools supporting weaker schools to improve.

I do not believe in imposing one particular model of school collaboration from the centre. I have seen a number of models work effectively.

Academy chains such as Ark and Harris demonstrate the ability of schools in tough neighbourhoods to achieve incredible results.

Co-operative trusts in Cornwall help protect the small, rural character of many schools and are protecting school assets such as playing fields, which are under threat from the Government.

And federations and clusters of schools such as Gipsy Hill in South London, the Montenev and Foxhill Federation in Sheffield, and the Kingsway Federation in Manchester show what can be achieved with better collaboration.

An Ofsted examination in September 2011, which visited 29 federations showed a sustained improvement in outcomes – in every single case. While the weaker schools had improved, there had been no drop off in performance in the stronger schools. Pupils were more confident because of the greater opportunities open to them and those with special educational needs and disabilities fared better. Federations shared a greater pool

of resources and expertise that could be used more flexibly. The key factor in success was the quality of leadership.

The Government missed a huge opportunity to achieve similar outcomes through their converter academy programme.

While they provided a large cash incentive to already outstanding schools to become academies – and many understandably took up their offer, there was no clear requirement on those schools to work with less successful schools in their community to raise standards beyond their own school gates.

Labour will ensure that stronger schools work with weaker schools, to ensure that no school is left behind.

Wider Children's Agenda

Of course we know that schools are only part of the answer. In Government, Labour committed to the Every Child Matters agenda. It resulted in unprecedented investment in early years' education, and the establishment of programmes like Sure Start.

We have seen how the Government is turning back the clock through a combination of deregulation, funding cuts and a neglect of the wider children's agenda.

The recent report by the Education Select Committee said that children's policy must not wither. The sad truth is that it is withering. There are 281 fewer Sure Start centres compared to 2010. Early Intervention budgets are facing a staggering cut of over 40% over the course of this parliament, as over £1.1 billion is taken out of programmes to help troubled families, fund children's centres and provide breaks for families with disabled children. These cuts will cost us far more in the long term.

Pre-school education is critical. But parents are facing a triple whammy on childcare – with rising costs, less support through the tax system and fewer places.

And the agenda of the Children's Minister, Liz Truss, has become clear. She wants to pursue Dutch-style deregulation, which when it was tried in the Netherlands caused costs to spiral for parents and taxpayers, and caused the quality of childcare and early education to fall.

Instead, Labour is examining options to improve both the affordability and quality of childcare, by learning from best practice in a range of countries, particularly in Scandinavia.

We want to explore co-operative models, whereby local parents have a far bigger say in running their local nursery and get a share of the profits. Childcare centres are run successfully along these lines in Sweden and in some parts of the UK already.

As any parent or teacher will tell you, giving a child the best start in life starts well before primary school.

Conclusion

Ed Miliband set out a radical and progressive vision for Britain when he talked about One Nation Labour. As we build toward 2015, every member of the Shadow Cabinet will be expanding on this theme, and One Nation Education will be fundamental to addressing the divided country we face today – and rebuilding our economy so it works for working people.

Forty years since Caroline Benn wrote *Halfway There*, I believe the comprehensive ideal is still worth fighting for. All abilities education, but not one size fits all. Fair admissions, allowing every child to succeed. No school left behind, raising standards in every community. Ending the Arc of Underachievement, to create an Age of Ambition.

I look forward to working with the Socialist Education Association to deliver these goals.

Thank you.