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School Wars: the Battle for Britain's Education

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Why is it that, in Britain today, state education fails to inspire the kind of automatic allegiance, pride and affection that are afforded to the National Health Service? In her wide-ranging and disarmingly honest exploration of the education system in this country (I'll return to the issue of which country that is), Melissa Benn offers a plausible answer to this question. She accomplishes this largely through a history of the last seventy years of schooling. It is, as she makes clear, a history of missed opportunities in the struggle for a coherent, comprehensive system, a history of the perpetuation of a deeply divisive, stratified and fragmented patchwork of education provision. Incoherence was there from the start, a product of the vested interests and retrogressive ideologies that deformed the 1944 Education Act, the legislation that, on the one hand, opened up the prospect of universal secondary education while, on the other, it maintained the old privileges of private and church schools and ensured that the new entitlement for all would take the divisive form of the tripartite system (grammar, secondary modern and secondary technical), through which class inequality would be reproduced. As Benn suggests, the new dispensation, like the pre-war version, was one in which 'the twin threads of class anxiety and class ambition were woven right through the school organisation' (p. 44).

This is not, of course, a new story. But one of the strengths of Benn's version of this history stems from the fact that she is an activist as well as a reporter. She thus has a keen sense that things might have been otherwise – that the 1944 settlement, for

example, was contentious and contested. She points to the consideration of 'multilateral' schools (an early model of the comprehensive) in the Spens Report (1938) and emphasises the parlous state of the private sector in the mid-1940s, when there was a widespread view that such bastions of class privilege were an anachronism. Benn's emphasis, then, is on the 1944 settlement as a failure of political will – and a precursor of more recent failures, particularly those of the Labour Party, in the field of education.

Benn's analysis of these political failings is acute. She captures well the piecemeal nature of the comprehensive revolution – and recognises that this is part of the answer to why the education service has never acquired the ideological resonance of the NHS. There has never been an organisational moment equivalent to the foundation of the NHS, a moment when a coherent national system of provision was established; more than this, though, even through the period of comprehensive expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement was never unambiguously supported by the Labour Party leadership. Benn has a telling phrase here, when she describes political leaders as 'persistently haunted by the grammar school narrative' (p. 62). I wonder if there isn't even more to this than Benn allows. The story of individual advancement through education is much older than the story of the state's involvement in schooling: it is implicated in Wordsworthian versions of the development of the self (Reid 2004) and in even older Protestant myths of individual betterment and/or redemption (Bunyan and Defoe, for instance – *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* remaining, after the Bible, the books most commonly to be found in British working-class households throughout the nineteenth century [Rose 2002]). What I am not suggesting is that these literary manifestations in and

of themselves explain the spinelessness of Labour Party politicians; what I am arguing is that the grammar school narrative has retained such extraordinary influence because it sits within a deeply-embedded way of conceptualising the individual as central to learning and development. (On the other hand, the NHS's central premise and promise, to treat *everybody* the same, keys into deeply-held assumptions about the essential sameness of the human form, beneath the superficiality of distinguishing features, beauty, or whatever else might mark out the individual body. Is this an effect of Cartesian ontology, locating difference – unique identity – in the mind, and equivalence in the body?)

What the grammar school narrative does is to mythologise education as a route out of poverty. It looks like the educational equivalent of the NHS, a means of defeating Beveridge's five giants (Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness [Beveridge 1942: 6]). And it is a mythology that flies in the face of the facts. Grammar schools did precious little for social mobility. In the 1950s, that heyday of the grammar school era, most of the children of semi-skilled and unskilled workers who managed to get into a grammar school left with fewer than three O-level passes, while only about five per cent of the children of unskilled workers who made it to grammar school emerged with two A-levels (Maclure 1969: 237). What had an effect, on education and on social structure in the postwar period, was the massive expansion of white-collar jobs; it was this economic growth that provided the impetus for the exponential rise in university places during the same period. The politicians' tendency to blame education for economic stagnation, for unemployment (the unschooled, or rather those lacking appropriate credentials of schooling, held responsible for their own joblessness) and for the lack of social mobility is a case of

mistaking cause for effect (Keep 2011). What the grammar school narrative also does is to focus attention on the individual rather than the group. The success story of the grammar school is the working-class pupil who escapes from the class into which they were born. It is a narrative founded on a deficit model of working class life and culture.

Benn is very good at inserting her own history into this wider narrative. She acknowledges that the fact that she went to Holland Park School, one of the flagship comprehensives of the Inner London Education Authority, was a reflection of her parents' commitment to comprehensive education. For Tony and Caroline Benn, there was no question of a separation of the personal and the political, no sense that what was good enough for others' children might not be good enough for their own. More than this, though, the book as a whole can be read as Melissa's tribute to her parents. It is dedicated to Tony, her father, but it is Caroline's extraordinary contribution to the defence of comprehensive education that stands behind and informs this work. There is a rather touching moment when Melissa visits Wellington College. She describes the school, which, 'set in four hundred acres of Berkshire countryside ... has the elegant grandeur of a vast, sprawling, stately home' (p. 135). Meeting its Master, Anthony Seldon, she has the sense that this encounter is, on a personal level, a reprise of earlier skirmishes in the school wars. Seldon's father, Arthur, founder of the Institute of Economic Affairs, had been a significant influence on Thatcherite policy, while his mother, Marjorie, advocated the introduction of vouchers into education: they were, in other words, ideological opponents of Tony and Caroline Benn. In exposing the essential exclusiveness of private schools such as Wellington, for all their talk of bursaries and partnerships, Melissa is continuing

her parents' work. And, like her parents, she manages to do this without rancour: she avoids the temptation of *ad hominem* attacks, even when that temptation must have been very great.

If there is a single villain of the piece, it is Tony Blair – and it is hard to argue with this casting. The vacuity of his thinking on education is demonstrated in his autobiography, from which Benn quotes extensively. And, though I have not been a member of the Labour Party for more than twenty years, I share Benn's outrage at Blair's characterisation of the comprehensive movement as 'pretty close to academic vandalism.' But the problem with New Labour's education policy cannot be attributed in its entirety to the former public schoolboy who was its leading light. The New Labour strategy was outlined, the year before the party came to power, in *The Learning Game* (Barber 1996), written by the man who became Blair's chief education adviser and who is now one of Michael Gove's heroes (Gove 2011). This strategy, best summarised by the mantra, 'standards, not structures', was somewhat more pernicious than Benn suggests. Rather than simply ignoring structural inequalities in existing provision, New Labour's approach was, from the very start, one of blaming the victim. The tone was set in the first action taken by David Blunkett as the incoming secretary of state for education, when he 'named and shamed' eighteen schools across the country. The schools, singled out because their results were not up to scratch, were, almost without exception, schools serving poor, working class areas. This was not, as Benn would have it, a policy of 'Let's Do the Very Best with What We Have and Don't Rock the Boat' (page 71). It was a very deliberate choice of which boat to rock. This strand in New Labour remained dominant throughout their thirteen years in government. Its focus on the standards

agenda, on high-stakes testing, punitive inspections and a narrowly economic view of the purposes of education was unwavering. Its commitment to social mobility at the expense of social justice, as Owen Jones has remarked, is based on a 'philosophy [that] is not rooted in improving the lot of the working class; it is about *escaping* the working class' (Jones 2011: 88; see also Yandell 2009, 2010).

Benn's instinct, as a campaigner for the comprehensive system that has yet to be achieved, is to remain as inclusive and as upbeat as possible. This is admirable, but there are times when it might be necessary to attain greater clarity about the objectives of this campaign. There is, for example, a long-running difference among the supporters of comprehensive schooling about admission arrangements. On the one hand, there are those who would privilege the desirability of a 'balanced' intake – by which is meant either a social mix (of classes, ethnicities, cultures) or a mix of 'abilities'; on the other, there are adherents to a community school paradigm, where the expectation is that all children and young people will attend their local school. The first position has a series of attendant difficulties, relating both to the mechanism(s) by which such a mix is to be attained (banding arrangements, bussing and ballots) and to the criteria used to determine the mix (none of the categories, of identity or ability, being either straightforward or uncontested). The second position is problematic to the extent that we live in a society which is deeply stratified and where structures of inequality are reflected, to a significant extent, in people's postcodes.

(There is a way of addressing this problem, which is to invest more heavily in the schools that are situated in areas of greatest economic disadvantage. This idea is

neither new nor particularly radical: it was the basis for the designation of 'Educational Priority Areas' in the Plowden Report (DES 1967); it is even reflected in current government policy, in the form of the pupil premium, allocated on the basis of the numbers of children in a school who are entitled to free school meals, the widely-used proxy indicator of poverty. Neither EPA funding nor the pupil premium, however, amounts to the kind of intervention that might adequately address the scale of disadvantage. There is a model of intervention available that might begin to do this, and it is one to which Benn refers. The Harlem Children's Zone, as featured in *Waiting for Superman*, does far more than provide education through charter schools. It amounts to a fully-fledged social intervention programme, including medical and childcare facilities as well as schooling (Ravitch 2010). As Benn points out, the HCZ is still deeply problematic in its treatment of those young people who don't make the grade. The relevance of the project here is simply in the scale of its funding: what it shows is that throwing large amounts of money at a problem that is causally related to poverty can help to solve the problem.)

In Scotland and Wales, the debate about different admissions systems, and indeed about comprehensive schooling itself, is scarcely a debate at all: the battle for education on which Benn reports is, to a large extent, an English affair. In more rural areas of England, too, the argument between balanced-intake and neighbourhood models of the comprehensive has hardly arisen: with dispersed populations, community schools have been just that – each school has served a fairly well defined geographical area. In urban areas, on the other hand, these differences matter – they produce different approaches to the structure and organisation of schooling. Benn favours the balanced-intake approach. She is impressed by the

'genuinely comprehensive intake' of Mossbourne in Hackney, the academy beloved of every politician from Blair to Gove, and she argues that the 'presence of higher-achieving students helps raise achievement for all' (p. 108). Elsewhere, in Kirklees for example, she supports the local council's attempt at school reorganisation aimed to achieve 'community cohesion' through creating schools with more ethnically diverse pupil populations. (The Kirklees reorganisation is being undermined by a new parent-led free school: the effect of the introduction of the free school will be to destabilise any attempt at planned provision across the area and to entrench existing social and ethnic divisions.)

I understand the force of these arguments, and yet I remain bothered by the 'balanced-intake' version of the comprehensive school. There are two reasons for my concern. First, all attempts to engineer a mix of students at a particular school tend to produce a situation in which the school chooses the students (and therefore, of course, rejects others). And the more schools are subject to high-stakes accountability measures in the form of testing regimes, the more inclined they will be to select students who are likely to produce an advantage for the school. Let me be more specific on this question. Across Hackney Downs from Mossbourne Academy lies the Nightingale Estate. Mossbourne is the local school for the children who live on the Nightingale Estate, but the kind of 'genuinely comprehensive intake' that the school favours means that many of those children are not offered a place at their local school. Balance here is inseparable from processes of exclusion. My second concern is this: the 'balanced intake' approach is predicated on the notion of ability as a more or less fixed and knowable category. (It isn't meaningful to talk about a mix of abilities unless you assume that each child's ability is measurable on entry to

a school.) This idea of ability has a long and disreputable history (Benn alludes to this in discussing the relationship between the tripartite system, the belief in different kinds of learner suited to different kinds of school, and Cyril Burt's mendacious findings on IQ testing in the 1920s and 1930s). The best refutation of this position is *Learning Without Limits* (2004), the wonderful collection by Susan Hart and others that systematically explores the pedagogic gains that are to be achieved by discarding the belief in fixed levels of ability.

Benn is at her best in revealing the monstrous unfairness – and the downright cruelty – of the stratified and atomised system that we have. She demonstrates very clearly why structures matter, why they make a difference to what schooling is and how they influence assumptions about what it is for. This is a lesson that the Labour Party has yet to learn, if we are to judge by the latest entry into the debate made by its newly-appointed education spokesperson, where we were promised a 'relentless focus on teaching quality' – and a resolute refusal to address systemic problems (Twiggy 2011). A marketised system encodes within its structures the message that schooling is about competitive individualism, about gaining and maintaining personal advantage; a comprehensive system at least allows the possibility that more social and intrinsic motivations might achieve prominence. In her final chapter, Benn begins to address more directly these questions of pedagogy, of curriculum content and purpose. There are glimpses here of a qualitatively different approach to schooling, one that treats education not as a sorting mechanism or a filter for social mobility but as a universal entitlement. It is beyond the scope of this book to flesh out in more detail what such an entitlement would look like; this is, nonetheless, a crucial task for all of us who want to continue the battle for a National Education Service.

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