1 Comprehensive education: theory and practice

The research on which this work is based arose from an interest in the practices and processes of comprehensive schooling and a commitment to a particular kind of sociological research: participant observation. This approach to the study of social phenomena necessarily requires the focus of data collection to be a small sector of the social world – in this case, a single comprehensive school, with its unique and specific structure, institutional culture and composition. However, this school, as a comprehensive school, is part of a nation-wide educational movement – comprehensive reorganization – which constitutes the most significant change in the organization of schooling in Britain since the 1944 Education Act. The comprehensive debate continues to be a social and political issue at all levels – national, regional and local; it sways elections, and it generates fierce emotion both among its defenders and its opponents. Thus, before embarking upon an introduction to the school which is the subject of this book, I shall attempt to summarize and analyse the national comprehensive debate, as a context within which the particular social processes evident at Beachside Comprehensive may be situated. I also hope to illustrate through the presentation of the case-study as a whole the way in which the detailed discussion of a single comprehensive school may be used to illuminate the more general issues of comprehensive education.

The comprehensive debate

Comprehensive education remains a highly contentious political issue in Great Britain, but I hope to demonstrate here that much of the political and educational rhetoric which surrounds the notion of comprehensiveness in this country ignores, or is irrelevant to, what actually goes on in schools. Indeed, any examination of the present provision of comprehensive education in Britain can only lead to the conclusion that as a descriptive category the term 'comprehensive school' remains essentially without analytical meaning.

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The variety of types of 'comprehensive school' is considerable. The comprehensive school survey *Half-way There* by Benn and Simon (1972) clearly demonstrates the variety of forms of organization and structure of comprehensive schools; here I am more concerned with *ideological* variations and their relationship to practices of schooling. Despite the well-documented political struggles between succeeding governments and recalcitrant pro- and anti-comprehensive local authorities, an examination of the literature on comprehensive education soon makes it apparent that there is no agreement either in government policy or in educational theory about the goals and purposes of comprehensive education. There is not even a generally accepted notion of what comprehensive schools are intended to achieve, as there was, as a result of the rhetoric of the 1944 Education Act and the Hadow and Norwood Reports that preceded it, about grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. The notion of three types of child espoused by Norwood and formally recognized in the three corresponding types of secondary school designated in the 1944 Act did establish an ideological and rhetorical framework of accepted, if not agreed, policy concerning what grammar schools, secondary modern schools, and technical schools were all about. No such set of general expectancies about what the schools should be like has accompanied the spread of 'comprehensive education'. This is, in part at least, a reflection of the process of growth of comprehensiveness itself, which has been piecemeal and *ad hoc*, with individual L.E.A.s developing their own unique schemes. But it must also be seen as related to the reluctance, until recently, of the pro-comprehensive Labour Governments to legislate on comprehensivization, much less to lay down any 'policy' about its aims and objectives. Even common-sense accounts, such as may be readily given of the grammar school – for example, that it is 'concerned with giving an academic education to the brighter child' – are not available to cover all the varieties of comprehensive school. Department of Education and Science Circular 10/65, *The Organization of Secondary Education*, was the first explicit statement of government policy on comprehensive education. It did not, however, set out positive objectives for comprehensive schooling; it merely outlined the six main forms of comprehensive reorganization that would be acceptable to the Secretary of State.

This lack of a guiding philosophy was recognized in the report and recommendations of the working-party set up in 1965 by Anthony Crosland, the then Secretary of State, to 'advise him on what research was desirable and possible as a guide to policy in developing comprehensive education'. The working-party suggested

first, that the facts about comprehensive schools should be ascertained, that steps should be taken to chart the growth of comprehensiveness and the practical educational problems which it posed, and that a means should be devised to measure how far various forms of comprehensive education attained their declared objectives.   (Monks 1968:v)

The National Foundation for Educational Research (N.F.E.R.) was commissioned to carry out a large-scale investigation, based on the recommendations of this working-party, into comprehensive education and to 'devise a scheme of evaluation'. Even then the first two studies to come out of the N.F.E.R. investigation were descriptive only (Monks 1968 and Monks (ed.) 1970); they worked to the guidelines of the original 1965 working-party report which stated that the objectives of compre-hensive schools which distinguished them from other secondary schools could be defined as

1. To eliminate separatism in post-primary education by gathering pupils of the whole ability range in one school so that by their association pupils may benefit each other and that hasty readjustments in grouping and in subjects studied may be made as pupils themselves change and develop.
2. To collect pupils representing a cross-section of society in one school, so that good academic and social standards, an integrated school society and a gradual contribution to an integrated community beyond school may be developed out of this amalgam of varying abilities and social environments.
3. To concentrate teachers, accommodation and equipment so that pupils of all ability groups may be offered a wide variety of educational opportunities, and that scarce resources may be used economically.
                                        (Monks 1968 :xi)

But this document for the most part concerns itself with educational abstractions, many of which are not open to strict practical interpretation or realistic evaluation. For instance, among aims mentioned are:

provision of individual welfare . . . Continuing equality of opportunity . . . no irrelevant obstacles to self-development . . . Flexibility which . . . encourages individual initiative . . . The achievement of social integration . . . An authority structure . . . which is appropriate to a school within a democratic society.
                                        (N.F.E.R. 1966 :*passim*)

Very few of the outlines and definitions go further than these educational ideals, and the vacuum created by the absence of formulations that encompass the *practice* of comprehensive education, once the children are in the schools, has only tended to perpetuate the values and attitudes of selective schooling within the new comprehensives. Daunt (1975 :6) says of the working-party statement on comprehensive goals:

There is nothing in all its 1000 odd words, not one sentence, one phrase, one word, which relates specifically to comprehensive education or which could not be construed as totally appropriate to a selective system.

As in the case of many other contributions to the theory of comprehensiveness made at the same time, there are four main themes in this statement: first, structure, that is, putting all children in one school, but always neglecting the continued existence of the private sector in referring to a 'cross-section of society'; second, social integration, the view that a comprehensive school system would ameliorate the effects of class divisions in British society, but once again neglecting the private sector and also the unequal distribution of success in school in terms of examination passes and staying on into the sixth form; third, resources, stressing the hope for advantages of plant facilities and teaching staff that would be economically feasible in the 'big-school', which appeared to be the only size of school considered; and fourth, community, the ties and integrative relationships between a school and its community.

The other major study of comprehensive education carried out at this time, *Half-way There* (Benn and Simon 1969; 2nd edn 1972), was a descriptive survey similar to those being produced by the N.F.E.R. It also made use of a similar definition of the comprehensive school. However, despite the growth in the number of comprehensive schools since 1965, it is still the case that no consensus is emerging; as the National Association of Schoolmasters' (N.A.S.) Report, *The Comprehensive School* (1964), aptly puts it, 'Comprehensive means different things to different people.' This view is put forward by several other writers on comprehensive education; Lawton (1977) and Bellaby (1977) are both critical of the lack of educational theory concerning comprehensive schools. In particular they are critical of the lack of coherent educational debate within the Labour Party. Parkinson (1970 : 126) also makes this point. He says:

The party has not shown a sufficient understanding of the sociological aspects of educational change, and has thought too much in terms of legislative and administrative change.

The 1977 Great Education Debate seemed to indicate that this state of affairs was about to change; the Government Green Paper itself admitted that the period from the end of the Second World War to 1977 was a time when the issues of secondary reorganization and building had 'overshadowed all education debate and education planning'. However, Lawton (1977 : 163) commenting on the Prime Minister's speech at Ruskin College, which heralded the start of the Great Debate, notes that

the secret Yellow Paper on which his speech was based betrayed many of the D.E.S. officials' familiar attitudes and prejudices on education, as well as a number of factual errors.

He goes on to add that 'the outstanding need now is still that the purpose of comprehensive schools should be clarified – not the least for the benefits of pupils' parents'.

In the same way that it was naïvely assumed that creation of the tripartite system in 1944 would automatically provide for 'meritocratic' selection and 'parity of esteem', many supporters of comprehensive education assume that calling a school 'comprehensive' and sending all the children from its immediate catchment area to it will eradicate the inequalities and unfairness of the tripartite system. This position fails to take into account either the different, sometimes conflicting, priorities that are held by the various advocates of comprehensive education, or the likelihood of the carry-over of attitudes and practices by teachers, from the grammar and secondary modern schools.

Almost all of the contributions towards the definition of comprehensive education have failed to take into account classroom practice and the internal dynamics of the school. Indeed it would be unrealistic not to recognize that many of the comprehensive schools set up between 1945 and 1965 and after, especially in rural areas, were set up primarily for reasons of economy, rather than from commitment to a comprehensive ideal. It was cheaper to staff, build and equip one all-purpose school than to establish two smaller schools of different types. Also, of course, many schools set up since 1965 have been a reluctant response to the D.E.S. Circular 10/65.

Daunt (1975:10), himself the ex-headmaster of a comprehensive school, is one of the few writers on comprehensive education to concern himself with the implementation of a *principle* of comprehensive education. He writes:

I believe that there is such an idea, which I shall call the comprehensive principle, and that it can be clearly identified and expressed.

That principle is that 'the education of all children is held to be of equal worth'. Daunt argues that in the early days of the comprehensive movement in the 1950s the impetus was a negative and institutional opposition to 11 plus selection, and the comprehensive principle really found its beginnings after the first comprehensive schools had already begun to operate. He says:

Teachers in comprehensive schools have discovered that in forming compre-
hensive schools we have not completed a major act of education reform but started
one, have not broken the back of a problem but merely set the scene in which the
problem may begin to be tackled.

Three models of comprehensive education

From the mass of literature from the political parties, L.E.A.s, Unions,
educationalists and pressure groups, a number of different models of
comprehensive schooling can be identified. Marsden (1971) suggests one
framework for analysing these models and the categories I use here owe
much to his analysis and to that of Hoare (1965). I shall refer to these
models or principles as the Meritocratic (equality of opportunity), the
Integrative (social engineering), and the Egalitarian. The meritocratic and
the egalitarian models may in part be considered as mutually exclusive, the
opposite extremes in a continuum of attitude and opinion. As we shall see
later, it is possible in some cases to identify these models with actual
schools. The integrative model must be regarded as a sub-type not found
independently, but often, although not necessarily, in association with one
of the other two. Whereas meritocratic and egalitarian principles may be
considered in terms of structural differences, the integrative model stresses
'process'.

    The principles of the meritocratic school are often couched in terms of
'equality of opportunity', the basis of this notion being that all children will
go to the same school and therefore, theoretically at least, will have an equal
opportunity to be an educational success. The weak versions of this model
are usually simply presented in terms of bland statements about all children
going to one school, merely a matter of the catchment area. But the
stronger versions state that the comprehensive school must be evaluated in
terms of its ability to maximize its pupils' qualifications, whatever may be
the consequences in terms of social and societal relationships. This is
neatly presented in Julienne Ford's study, *Social Class and the Comprehensive
School* (1969 : 32). She says :

It is widely believed that comprehensive reorganisation will go some way towards
ameliorating this situation [that working-class areas tend to have smaller
proportions of grammar school places than their I.Q. distributions should justify],
that the extent of 'wastage of talent' or 'uneducated capacity' will be reduced and
that, in fact, comprehensive schooling will provide greater equality of opportunity
for those with equal talent.

This democratic ideology of comprehensive education is argued both on

economic grounds (Newsom Report 1963 and Robbins Report 1963) and pedagogical grounds (Vaizey and Debeauvais 1961), although in the former case the stress is normally upon the needs of society rather than the pupils themselves.

The view of the school embodied in this model is traditional and orthodox, and the comprehensive school is intended to function in a way that is not essentially different from the selective system, only 'fairer' and more efficient. It is not a rejection of the bipartite system in principle, but on the grounds that the selective system was good in terms of its aims, but that it was not operating adequately. For instance, in the Fabian Pamphlet, *New Look at Comprehensive Schools* (Armstrong and Young 1964 : 1), the point is made that

To achieve genuine equality of opportunity, we require . . . to reorganise the State Secondary Schools on comprehensive lines in order to end the segregation by the 11 plus examination which is now almost universally condemned on educational as well as social grounds.

The model assumes that the schools operate in a cultural vacuum and once given access to the school that the pupils will automatically achieve their 'full potential'. It ignores the factors of class and culture conflict and discontinuity that have been shown to be important in limiting the levels of achievement that children attain.

A typical example of this kind of comprehensive school would be Rhodes Boyson's Highbury Grove, which G. H. Bantock (1975 : 17) described as:

A highly meritocratic institution where the emphasis is on disciplined structured learning and achievement in examination terms. I have visited the school myself on several occasions during Dr Boyson's headmastership. Discipline was firm but cheerful; attention was paid to social matters but the aim of the headmaster was undisguisedly and unashamedly academic in the sense that learning took the first priority.

The meritocratic school is typically streamed and/or heavily set, and is the kind of comprehensive school advocated by the National Association of Schoolmasters:

Incidentally, the term 'comprehensive school' does not necessarily imply as it does in some other countries, [e.g.] the United States, that children of different abilities are placed in the same class. (N.A.S. 1964 : 3)

The integrative school model is based on social engineering, and stresses improved qualities of citizenship and the achievement of a tolerant or

socially conscious society, by ensuring that all children from whatever social background go to the same school.

The primary emphasis is on the amelioration or eradication of social class differences through the pupils' experience of social mixing in a common secondary school. This particular view of the comprehensive school has been strongly represented in the Labour Party's thinking about comprehensive education. Anthony Crosland (1956 : 178), stressing the importance of creating *tolerant citizens*, wrote in *The Future of Socialism*:

In these schools it is hoped that class barriers will be broken down, children will mix freely with the 'all sorts' that are supposed to make a world and thus learn the tolerance so essential in their education in and for democracy.

Benn and Simon (1972 : 110) also discuss comprehensive education in these terms, but from a rather different political position, giving more stress to schooling as a mechanism for producing *socially conscious* citizens.

In a society with class and race differences, a school that reflects all sections of a local community will often reflect these differences in the school. The comprehensive school does not offer pupils a chance to hide from society, but the opportunity to learn in the conditions of social reality that prevail in the wider community. Where there are tensions, the opportunity to come to terms with them or to effect improvements through them, [is] just as likely to be realistic, and in the end, lasting, when approached in years to come by men and women who have had a comprehensive, rather than a segregated education.[1]

These ends are not necessarily to be obtained by a radical change in the education that is being offered in school, but rather by the manipulation of social relations by effecting or creating awareness of social differences that exist within society. In as much as the 'tolerance' version of the integrative school, as articulated by Crosland, is coupled with a belief in the maintenance of academic streaming, it conflicts, as we shall see, with the tenets of the egalitarian model. Crosland believed that to abolish streaming would be 'against commonsense', while Harold Wilson referred to comprehensive schools as 'grammar schools for all'.

Thus, as did the previous model, this fails to take into account the curriculum or the organization of the classroom as important factors to be changed in the process of reform.

The third model of comprehensive education, the egalitarian, which although not opposed to either academic excellence or improved social relationships, stresses the importance of changes in educational ethos and the structure of the learning process in school as being necessary to these ends, whereas the first two say nothing *explicit* about changes in the process

of schooling. For example, Marsden (1971 : 22–3) argues that if egalitarian education is to be achieved, the

schools must exhibit a whole range of educational innovation and openness in the curriculum and teaching methods and relationships with the outside world which will bring about a new ethos and a new view of the child; only in a cooperative framework which sees children as of equal worth will equality be achieved.

Daunt's (1975 : 10) 'comprehensive principle' would certainly come into this category. Probably the best known example of this kind of school, or coming fairly close to it, would be Countesthorpe College, a school where the instrumental aims are given less importance than the expressive. Bernbaum's (1973) case-study of the school carried out for the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation describes it thus:

The attitude of a 'large number' of the staff towards the academic work of the school is ambiguous. It has already been shown that the largest staff choice for most important innovation (45%) is in the area of greater equality in social relations between staff and children. It has been shown also, that this aspect of the school gives most staff their greatest satisfaction. Moreover, when the teachers were given a list of 12 items by means of which the influence of the school would make itself felt and asked to say whether the item was likely to be 'highly important', 'moderately important', or 'not important', the two items which received the highest number of 'highly important' rulings were:
1. visible improvements in pupils' social adjustment, and
2. visible improvements in the communities' involvement.
Both of these are clearly in the expressive area. Significantly also, visible improvement in pupils' academic achievement was placed 11th out of 12 in the 'highly important' column.

Obviously, examples of the egalitarian comprehensive school are very few and far between. Marsden (1971) argues, in contrast to Daunt, that the egalitarian principles of the early post-war support for comprehensive education (cf. Banks 1955) was couched in terms of this philosophy, but that this was watered down by those who gave their support to an extension of the middle-class grammar school tradition (the meritocratic school). Most of the comprehensives created during the 1960s were probably of the meritocratic type, streamed academically and socially, and competing with grammar schools by entering large numbers of pupils for public examinations. The meritocratic view of the comprehensive school thus replaced the 'three types of child' ideology of the tripartite system with an ideology of equality of opportunity based on the achievement of an 'efficient' education system. Hoare (1965) refers to this line of support for comprehensive education as the 'rationalization' of the system.

I have argued that in the meritocratic and social engineering models of the comprehensive school, the processes going on within the school have been taken as given and go unquestioned. This is also reflected in the 'Black Box' model of the school that was prevalent in research and administration in education during the 1950s and much of the 1960s. Schools were seen to operate around and not through the curriculum and the educational process. Adherents of the meritocratic and social engineering models gave little emphasis to changes in the internal organization of the comprehensive school, assuming that the existence of the school was the only necessary condition for achieving stated aims and ideals. There is in fact considerable carry-over from the forms of school organization that existed in the grammar schools. It is only in the case of the egalitarian school that the processes of teaching and learning themselves are considered as part of what is to be changed, so that the nature, as well as the form, of the educational process becomes problematic.

In presenting this review of comprehensive 'theory', I am not concerned with the pros and cons of the various models as such. Nor am I concerned to evaluate them. What I am concerned to do is first to place Beachside School in an ideological context and, secondly, to demonstrate the lack of attention given to the processes of schooling by many of the contributions cited. Several points do emerge from this review which are open to investigation in the study of a comprehensive school and where appropriate I have taken them up in the text. However, this is not a 'test' of comprehensiveness of the kind done by Ford (1969); this is a study of comprehensive education in action in one school.[2]

These models of comprehensive schooling are derived from different, often rival, ideologies of comprehensive education. And although it has been possible to find examples for the meritocratic and egalitarian models, most comprehensive schools would undoubtedly demonstrate a mixture of these philosophies, if only at the ideological level. This may be evident in a conflict between the stated objectives defined by a headmaster and the actual day-to-day practice of his teachers; alternatively, different ideologies may coexist within different sectors of the same school. But it is clear from the brief review above that attempts to realize a particular principle or philosophy can be linked to different 'types' of comprehensive school and to different forms of internal structure.

The comprehensive ideology of Beachside School

The local authority and comprehensive reorganization

The Local Education Authority of which Beachside is a part was not slow