

Jack Jones

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In one way or another education has played a significant part in my life - as a practitioner, an administrator, and, perhaps most importantly, as a parent. My three children have all progressed through the education system in Plymouth, with varying degrees of academic success, and are now leading full lives as young adults. As a practitioner I am the Deputy Head of a Primary School in one of the post war housing estates in Plymouth. I was a late entrant to the teaching profession, having previously been an officer in the Merchant Navy, and I like to think that that experience has added to my professional expertise as a classroom teacher and as part of a school management team. As an administrator I am a member of the West Devon Education Advisory Committee - which advises the Devon County Council Education Committee - and I am also a Governor of several schools.

However, it is perhaps because I am a Socialist that my thinking about education, and its aim in Britain and particularly in Plymouth, has polarised. Education should be about the quality of opportunity for each and every child, and it should be about the removal of privilege from our society; so that whatever the background of any individual he or she should be given the opportunity to lead full active and creative lives without any constraints whatsoever.

There is a lot to be proud about in the British educational system, but there is also a lot to be concerned about. We suffer from various inequalities up and down the country and as a society we should be striving to make certain changes to eliminate those inequalities. For example, there is the difference between Public Schools - or private education - and the state system. Whilst one can argue that in a free society individuals should have the right to opt out of the state system and pay for private education, one should also be aware that the full cost of private education is not carried by these individuals, and that taxpayers' money, in one form or another, aids these schools. It is still a fact that certain of our major universities reserve 50% of their places to Public Schools. These inequalities should not be part of our society nor part of our education system.

There are, of course, further inequalities within our state system nationally. These occur mainly because different local authorities have differing priorities regarding expenditure on education; and although it is often said that a good teacher will teach well in a barn without any equipment, it is, in general, vital that our children are provided with decent buildings, up to date equipment, the latest books, and, of course, sufficient well paid professional teachers. Without trying to make any political points it is interesting to analyse the league tables of expenditure of different authorities and compare them with the political allegiances of those authorities. Our very own Council of Devon, with a vast Conservative majority, is consistently near the bottom of the league in educational spending - in the provision of new schools, in the supply of books and equipment, and in the pupil-teacher ratios. Clearly an inequality of opportunity for the children of Devon.

Coming closer to home and looking at the particular provision of education for secondary age children in Plymouth, we find very clear inequalities of opportunity. Historically this is because Plymouth has maintained a selective system in an age when most of the country - and most of the rest of Devon - has changed to neighbourhood comprehensive schools with either sixth form provision at those schools, or sixth form provision centrally at a college.

In Plymouth the selective system has been diversified to include comprehensive schools on the periphery of the city, with an opportunity for parents to choose which type of system they prefer (providing they meet any transport costs); and now there are plans to reorganise so that there will be neighbourhood comprehensives available in all areas, whilst retaining a system of selection at 11-plus. It is probably the only city in England with such a hotch potch of educational provision.

In my view - and in the view of most thinking educationalists - it is not possible to have two systems working side by side. Either the Education Committee should choose to retain a system of selection - a creaming off of children at 11 who are capable of obtaining university degrees ten years later - or they should choose a system of neighbourhood comprehensive schools capable of providing the best possible curriculum for every child in every sphere of the curriculum.

As a practising teacher of 11 year old children, and having seen the basis of selection over several years, I can state categorically that it is not possible to assess children at that age with any degree of certainty for their future academic potential. We all know of children who were "failures" at 11 who have gone on to do great things, and we all know of children who were successful in their 11 plus examination who became 'O' level "dropouts", despite their grammar school education.

The proposed reorganisational changes in Plymouth will only exacerbate the inequalities of the selective system, because they plan neighbourhood comprehensives available for all whilst retaining the grammar schools; all that will happen is that the creaming off process will continue, and so the comprehensive schools will

inevitably end up as better class secondary modern schools. They will be schools deprived of many of their future sixth formers by the 11 plus selection examination, having to compete with the grammar schools. Unfortunately too many people will only see the end product of such a system and compare 'results'. Such results are almost always based on academic success in examination results and take very little notice of any of the real - but intangible - results of looking at the end product of a well rounded person able to face future life in a mature and creative way. In general the whole basis of educational ethos is much more likely to succeed in a comprehensive school environment than in a system that unfairly selects out certain individuals at an early age in their educational careers.

Therefore it is most important that administrators, practitioners, and particularly parents continue to fight to remove the inequalities of opportunity that remain in our school system locally and nationally, and continue to work for a system that will give each and every child all of those opportunities that they are entitled to and that they deserve. There are an awful lot of dedicated men and women at the chalk face of education who are doing a grand job, and there is a lot to be proud of in the British system; but we still have a long way to go before we reach that goal of real equality of opportunity.