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SECONDARY MODERN EXAMINATIONS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN ENGLAND

William Taylor

Since 1944, some seventy per cent of all the adolescents who attend state-maintained schools in England have received their education in a Secondary Modern school. These schools were established as the third element in the tripartite structure of secondary education—Grammar, Technical and Modern—and developed out of the old elementary and ‘all-age’ schools and the non-selective Senior and Central schools that were provided for older children during the period between the two world wars. It was intended in 1944 that the three different types of secondary school should have ‘parity of esteem’, and official opinion encouraged the view that this would be achieved, on the one hand, by equating the quality of the staff, buildings and equipment, and, on the other, through the stress on cooperation rather than competition that would characterize post-war society, and the playing down of examination work and paper qualifications in favour of a liberal, cultural and non-vocational general education. In practice, however, things have not worked out as expected. In the first place, there are still certain important differences between the various types of secondary school in respect of levels of equipment, the qualifications and rewards of staff and so on. Secondly, social engineering has failed to diminish competition and the significance of status differences in English life, and examinations are of greater importance than before. In such a situation, and where, as was recently pointed out in this Journal, “the present selection system results in “segregated” schools, the secondary modern schools being almost entirely working class and the grammar schools being largely middle class,”¹ it is inevitable that the modern school is regarded as third best in the secondary system, and the grammar, and to a lesser extent technical schools possess the social and educational prestige.

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The modern school was exhorted to achieve 'parity of esteem' on its own terms, and not to copy the grammar or technical school. The occupational implications of eleven-plus selection for different types of secondary education being what they are, however, it was clearly not within the power of administrators and teachers to create a distinctive new form of secondary education, of equal status to that provided by the grammar schools. A recognition of this fact has led many modern schools to try to obtain prestige by means of vocational and examination courses which rival those offered by technical and grammar schools. The principal mark of a successful grammar school education is the possession of the 'General Certificate of Education' in a substantial number of subjects, including English and Mathematics and a foreign language. This certificate was instituted on a national basis in 1952, and can be taken at three levels—'Ordinary,' 'Advanced' and 'Scholarship.' Most grammar school pupils take ordinary level at the age of sixteen, and those who remain at school after this age usually take Advanced and Scholarship level at eighteen, most frequently with a view to obtaining entrance to the University. A certificate can be obtained in as little as one subject—it is what is on the certificate rather than the possession of it as such that is important—but for many purposes, such as entry to a Teachers' training college, passes in at least five subjects at 'O' level are required. During recent years there has been a considerable increase in the number of employers and professional bodies requiring G.C.E. qualifications from applicants for employment or entry, and it is beginning to play an important part in acceptance for apprenticeship training for certain skilled manual work. When the G.C.E. was instituted, it was stated that it was intended for those going on to the university, or to other forms of continued education, and not as a school-leaving certificate; the education of the majority of adolescents, even those in grammar schools, should not be cramped and confined within examination syllabuses. These intentions have not been borne out in practice, however, and the possession of 'a GCE' has become the hallmark of a successful secondary education. As a result, many modern schools, from which examinations were virtually excluded during the early post-war years, have begun to prepare pupils for the General Certificate. In 1959, 970 modern schools, about a quarter of the total, entered 15,480 candidates, about half of all those children who had remained at modern schools after the statutory minimum leaving age of fifteen. The average number of subjects entered was 3.9, the average number of passes secured 1.9. This represents a

considerably smaller measure of success than that obtained by grammar school pupils, and, unless candidates go on to add to the number of their passes by part-time study, many of the certificates obtained must be of little value outside school.

Examination work, however, has several other practical advantages in the day by day work of the schools. Since the proportion of grammar school places varies widely from one part of the country to another, many modern schools have found themselves with pupils who, had they lived elsewhere, would have been selected for the grammar or technical school. It would clearly be wrong to deprive these children of a chance of occupational and social advancement by means of examination success, and, furthermore, they are not likely to produce their best work in an atmosphere of frustration and where there is nothing towards which they can direct their energies. Parents take a greater interest in the work of their children when some form of tangible success is at stake, and, particularly in areas of higher socio-economic status, there has sometimes been a good deal of pressure from parents on the schools to provide examination courses. The matter is very frequently one for the headteacher to decide, and in some places, particularly in densely populated urban areas where several modern schools can be found within a few miles radius, there is a danger in a school feeling itself to be 'odd man out', and, if one headteacher introduces examination work, others may follow suit. Furthermore, local employers may look for some concrete indication of a boy or girl's level of attainment, and a 'Report' which is specific to a particular school may not be regarded as adequate for this purpose. Teachers often welcome the opportunity to prepare their pupils for examinations, partly because of the prospect of some tangible measure of their teaching skill, and partly because it involves a type of approach with which they are familiar from their own school, college and university days.

For all these reasons, social, occupational and motivational, the secondary modern school is tending to become more and more involved with examination work of various kinds. If the work leading to the G.C.E. can provide a spur to endeavour for the most able pupils in such schools, it follows that some 'lower-level' examination can similarly motivate the next level of ability. Hence many modern schools are entering pupils for examinations organised by national examining bodies such as the College of Preceptors and the Royal Society of Arts. These are usually of a lower level of difficulty than the G.C.E., and have less national standing. Some are taken by

modern school pupils at the end of their fourth year in the school, and do not require an extended course going beyond the statutory leaving age. In addition to these national examinations, a large number of modern schools are now associated with local and regional examining schemes, the syllabuses and papers being drawn up by the teachers themselves and a leaving certificate of common currency in the area concerned being issued.

As suggested earlier, this spread of examination work is in direct contradiction to the hopes expressed after the passing of the 1944 Education Act regarding the development of secondary, and, in particular, secondary modern, education. Insofar as the growing popularity of such examination work has had a favourable effect on the relative status of the modern school, and has opened a wider range of opportunity to children from all social levels, it can be welcomed. There are, however certain very real educational disadvantages of becoming too examination conscious, such as the narrowing effect on the syllabus and work of the school, the remoteness from the individual pupil and class room of any large scale external examination, and the tendency towards an academic and abstract approach to experience that examination work implies. To these familiar criticisms must be added the increased possibilities for educational and social failure that the participation of larger and larger numbers of pupils in examination work presupposes. But the increasing tendency to rely upon examination results and objective criteria of competency, even at comparatively humble occupational levels, has other more serious, if rather less tangible, social implications.

We have become accustomed to the concept of a society in which social position and reward are no longer determined by accidents of birth, but in which considerations of ability and merit are regarded as of cardinal importance. This is not to claim that we have yet reached a position where 'ability and aptitude' alone determine occupational and social advance, but this is at least the ideal towards which much of the work of our educational system is directed. But if life-chances are no longer determined by birth, it would surely be wrong to determine them with equal finality at the age of eleven or sixteen, and it is in this direction that the growing importance of educational and occupational selection by examination is leading. A healthy democratic society requires possibilities for occupational and social movement to take place at several points in the life-span of an individual—the emergency training schemes in various skilled trades, teaching and so on, that were instituted in England after the second World War

enabled many men and women to enter occupations that would otherwise have been closed to them. It might be objected that in this the community was merely giving a second chance to those who had suffered from the pre-war lack of educational opportunity. This is, of course, to some extent true, but despite the greater accuracy of eleven-plus selection, the abolition of fee-paying in state schools, and the wide range of educational opportunity that exists today, it seems doubtful if *all* the reserves of talent have been exploited and that *all* those who might profit from higher education or have the ability to perform skilled work at some time in their lives are now selected during their youth. An official enquiry regarding the educational needs of adolescents found that, of a very large sample of young men entering the army for compulsory national service who were divided into six levels of ability on the basis of objective tests, nine per cent of the top level, and sixty-five per cent of the second level, had left school at the minimum statutory leaving age of fifteen.² In these circumstances, any move that would increase the rigidities that at present render movements between types of job and levels of skill and status more difficult should surely be resisted. The tripartite division of schools, insofar as it determines an individual's subsequent occupational opportunities, can be looked upon as one of these rigidities. The importance of the tripartite system is now being blurred by the entry of the modern school into the field of examination work and the growth of opportunities in further education, which serve to reduce the significance of the eleven-plus examination. At the same time, however, the methods employed to blur the distinction between different types of school may themselves by encouraging too great a dependence upon examination results and other 'objective' tests of suitability for various levels of employment, create new rigidities which are as unwelcome as the old. In this context, the role of apprenticeship, insofar as it closes the entrance to many skilled trades to anyone older than sixteen, needs also to be considered. If the results of an examination taken at the secondary modern school are to play a part in determining an adult's opportunity to move between various levels of skill, then the efforts of the modern school, valuable as they may have been in terms of the improvement of its own status, have done little to encourage that healthy mobility and flexibility referred to earlier. In other words, seeking to overcome the disadvantages of a competitive and selective educational system, the examination work of the modern school further emphasizes the social disadvantages of such a system.

Whether the introduction of inclusive comprehensive secondary schools would resolve these difficulties is a matter of doubt. The demand for qualifications is a characteristic of our present stage of economic and social development, and is outside the range of purely educational reform. On the other hand, unselective schools would at least avoid the proliferation of examinations that results from the attempt of different types of secondary school to enhance their status relative to one another, and each school, through the wide range of courses that it could offer, could probably furnish more effective and worthwhile motivations than those provided by external examinations. Furthermore, an inclusive secondary school would at least provide the basis for the greater measure of understanding and social tolerance that is required if the less desirable status stereotypes of our educational system are to be eradicated.

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