
Educational change 1918-1944

In part 2 of his series, Stephen Lambert considers whether the rise of 'secondary and further education for all' brought about equality of educational opportunity in the North East of England.

Although the vast majority of children were educated in elementary schools up to the age of 11 or 12 by 1918 (mostly in classes of 40), central government focus turned to secondary and technical education by the turn of the decade. There were three main reasons for this. One: there was a need for greater economic efficiency. The First World War had exposed weaknesses in British scientific and technical education. Two: a need for an educated electorate. The 1918 Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all men over 21 and women aged over 30. Three: within the trade union and Labour movement there were calls for greater social equality, with the socialist writer R. H. Tawney demanding more adult education alongside 'secondary education for all'. At this stage access to 'proper secondary', further and higher education for working-class children was strictly limited. Social reformers like Tawney saw post-13 education as a mechanism to challenge class-based inequalities which scarred much of the UK, especially in the North of England.

The Fisher Act 1918 set the state school leaving age at 14 and began a scheme for part-time education at 'continuation schools' between 16 and 18.

Meanwhile a ground-breaking report on adult education was published a year later and the term 'mature student' was coined. Throughout the early 1920s the council-funded and trade union supported Workers Educational Association (WEA) expanded its provision for adults, with thousands of ex-servicemen getting the chance of going to university. For the late Nigel Todd (former Regional Director NE WEA), many former adult-educated soldiers sought to change the world by channelling their energies into the League of Nations, while the NUS was set up to help 'restore international peace' in a troubled world (1).

The inter-war period saw some reorganisation of education for the 'adolescent'. Sir Henry Hadow was appointed by Charles Trevelyan MP (Newcastle Central, Labour), president of the Board of Education, to look into post-elementary schooling for young people and produced his influential report in 1926. For Hadow, secondary schooling should begin at 11 and be free. Two types of 'secondary school' were advocated: existing secondary or 'higher' schools were to be rebranded as 'grammar schools', providing a more academic education, while the others were to be renamed 'modern' schools, in which children would

remain till the age of 15. During the period a minority of pupils aged 13 might transfer to 'junior technical' schools whose age of entry was later than other schools. Hadow stressed the need for 'parity of esteem' between schools and recommended that the leaving age be raised to 15.

Although the report represented major policy change with significant future results, Hadow's planned reorganisation was delayed till the 1930s due to economic factors - the 'Geddes Axe' public expenditure cuts - and backward-looking local education authorities (LEAs). Although progress was slow throughout the era, both Sanderson (2) and Gardiner (3) point out that by 1938 two-thirds of children were getting some sort of secondary education. Yet, as the Oxford University historian Selina Todd argues, only 14 per cent of youngsters were continuing their education till the age of 15 or 16 (4). Post-16 continuation schools fell victim to the Geddes Axe and largely ceased, with the exception of one in Rugby. In reality, secondary education, and grammar schools in particular, were dominated by the middle classes who could afford the fees and their children's maintenance costs. In the North East only a minority of working-class children were participating in meaningful secondary education till the age of 16, helped by council scholarships and free places. As the historian John Stevenson notes, County Durham was one of a few LEAs which offered up to 100 per cent free places (5).

In 1938 the government published the Spens Report, which concerned itself primarily with secondary grammar and technical schools. Spens argued against the concept of a common secondary school (comprehensive) for all, on the grounds of size. Rather he argued that there should be selective secondary schools for 'brighter' children which would be more vocational - schooling geared to boys and girls 'who desired to enter industry and commerce at 16'. Spens recommended three types of secondary school - the grammar, the technical and the 'modern', with selection at 11 and based on the principle of 'parity of esteem'.

Five years later Norwood reaffirmed the need for a tripartite system of secondary education with the three types of school to cater for three types of intelligence - academic, practical, and that which dealt with 'concrete things rather than with ideas'. Meanwhile the evacuation of children to the countryside revealed low standards of life and schooling, with over half a million youngsters receiving no education past the age of 11. As Menter and his colleagues note, the state recognised that low-income families who had suffered during the war deserved a better future: 'there was a concern to encourage the spiritual, mental and physical well-being of the community' (6).

Several policy thinkers and Labour politicians like Ellen Wilkinson, MP for Jarrow, were calling for more social justice alongside more economic efficiency. Even

the prime minister, Winston Churchill, stressed the need for the privileges of the few to be shared by the many after the war. In 1942 Sir William Beveridge identified 'ignorance' as one of the five giants to be conquered if general welfare was to be improved.

In 1944 the important Butler Education Act was passed, which represented a major stage of secondary education, with the formal establishment of the post-war tripartite system, and a commitment to further education from the age of 16 to 18. Yet Sanderson (7) argues that the Act's importance has been overstated. Although the school leaving age did rise to 15 in 1947, the Act itself required little of LEAs beyond the provision of education appropriate to a child's 'aptitude, age and ability'.

For many critics like Selina Todd (8), Butler's Act perpetuated the selective tripartite system which had existed since 1918. The 11+ exam was unfair and biased towards the middle classes. Working-class access to grammar schools remained small compared to the pre-war period. Equality of opportunity was not fully realised, with few technical schools built after the war, mostly in industrial towns like North Shields, Hebburn and Sunderland. In practice the post-war secondary system till the 1970s was bipartite rather than tripartite.

Despite the development of state secondary education, private schools used by the upper/ upper-middle class continued to flourish across Tyneside and elsewhere. This reflected the rising incomes of both professionals and 'black-coated workers'. Nationally the number of privately educated pupils rose from 22,000 in 1918 to 204,000 by 1940. On Tyneside in 1936 eight secondary schools were 'under trusts or private management, with the city's Royal Grammar School being the most prominent'. For Bill Dennison and Tony Edwards (9), Newcastle had a 'relatively high density of private secondary schools'.

It was not till well after the war that working-class students started to access further and higher education in any great numbers.

1. Nigel Todd (June 2018) - letter to *The Guardian*.
2. Michael Sanderson (1999), *British Social Welfare in the Twentieth Century*.
3. Juliet Gardiner (2011), *The Thirties: An Intimate History of Britain*.
4. Selina Todd (2015), *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*.
5. John Stevenson (2004), *British Society 1914-45*.
6. Steve Barlett & Diane Burton (2016), *Introduction to Education Studies*.
7. Michael Sanderson, op. cit.
8. Selina Todd (2021), *Snakes and Ladders: The Great British Social Mobility Myth*.
9. John Goddard & Fred Robinson (1987), *Post Industrial Tyneside*.